



WEST MIDLANDS POLICE: ENHANCING POLICING AT A TIME OF AUSTERITY

West Midlands Police is the UK's second-largest police force. Its team covers 348 square miles, protects 2.8 million people and manages over 2,000 emergency calls an hour.

At a time of austerity, the force is faced with how to maintain, or improve, service levels at a lower cost and with fewer officers. In search of answers it's looking to enhance every aspect of its work by 2020 and is partnering with Accenture to roll out a number of new technology initiatives – including a high-profile deployment of body worn video cameras.

"Since radios became widely available 20 years ago, not much has altered in policing. Body-worn video cameras then are a game changer. Our evidence shows that not only do they reduce assaults – while making us more accountable – but convictions rise, too. This technology comes along just at the time when we must do more with less and, by reducing paperwork it frees officers to spend more time on the street – that's the holy grail,"

PC Will Salt, Subject Matter Expert, Body-Worn Video, West Midlands Police.

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THE GOAL: INCREASE CONVICTIONS AND REDUCE COMPLAINTS

West Midlands Police conducted a trial of body-worn video cameras to evaluate the impact that the technology might have on improving conviction rates, reducing complaints against officers, and, by improving efficiencies and productivity, saving money. The trial, which was rolled out in one response station covering several boroughs, had a broader remit too with – the force looking closely at how captured footage could be cost-efficiently and safely stored, retrieved and shared.

THE SOLUTION: AXON VIDEO CAMERAS AND EVIDENCE.COM

West Midlands Police reviewed a range of body-worn video cameras against key criteria such as image quality, robustness and IP rating, ease of use, battery life and unit docking. Special interest was also taken in the software and back end management system including how video would be catalogued, managed and shared.

“The Axon Body 2 performed well,” says Will Salt, Subject Matter Expert, Body-Worn Video, West Midlands Police. “But what really convinced us to go with Axon is that the camera is just part of a well thought out video management system built around Evidence.com and a range of Axon apps. Evidence.com and the apps deliver against our vision for 2020 of using versatile and agile technology to help our officers work more effectively.”

Evidence.com is a secure, UK cloud-based storage system. Each officer has a user ID that’s associated with their cameras. When they dock their cameras footage is auto-transferred to Evidence.com and assigned to their account to attach case notes and more. To assist officers in capturing images they will have access to Axon Capture, a secure mobile app available on their phablets. The officers are presented with simple, guided workflows to process photographs automatically (e.g. adding GPS locations and metadata) that are seamlessly synced with their Evidence.com profile. In addition, Evidence.com will be used to manage any form of digital file associated with cases including photos, word documents, audio recordings and CCTV.

Given the simplicity of the cameras, software and apps, a training programme wasn’t needed. Instead officers were given a 40-minute overview together with a dos and don’ts document to get up to speed with the camera and usage scenarios. So far 1,600 cameras have been issued.

RESULTS: A FORCE MULTIPLIER

An eye-catching cost saving is that, by using Evidence.com, there was no need to spend an estimated £4 million to enhance and secure the force’s on premise data center to store digital evidence. And, as teams get used to their cameras – and only record what they really need – the amount of footage is falling. Indeed, over five years the estimated cost of cloud storage is just £50,000.

What’s more, the results seen in the detailed pilot of body-worn video trialled are being replicated in the wider deployment. Says Will Salt: “Cameras change the psychology of confrontation. They’re highly visible and act as a deterrent while it’s no longer an officer’s word against a suspect’s. We’re seeing a host of benefits.”

While these include a rise in charges, which could actually increase case loads, more suspects are opting for early guilty pleas (to offset this workload). One of the main areas where charges are on the up is with domestic violence. While there is a difficulty in obtaining the support of the victim to secure a conviction, verbal confirmation of an assault with associated video evidence, as Will Salt says, “Opens the door to a victimless prosecution that would otherwise not have happened”.

The cameras are also delivering against a key goal with officers nearly 300 percent less likely to be injured when wearing a camera. This delivers a knock-on effect in reduced costs as the force does not need to pay for medical assistance or send officers to hospital to accompany injured colleagues. What’s more, complaints have fallen by 93 percent. “We had one incident where a suspect dropped a complaint on seeing video. That ‘case’ was over in 20 minutes when in the past it would have dragged on for months,” comments Will Salt. Also, a huge time – and therefore cost – saving is coming from more effective workflows.

Previously, officers followed a convoluted process when using images as evidence – including emailing an image to themselves, printing it, sealing it in an evidence bag and taking it to a secure store. Now images are securely processed and evidential data added and sent to Evidence.com using Axon’s suite of mobile applications. “On average, each officer saves around two every time they take a photo exhibit: that’s a massive time saving across a year. This will only increase as we embed Evidence.com into our workflows,” observes Will Salt.

In the coming months, and along with forces using Evidence.com that include the Metropolitan, City of London, and Greater Manchester Police Forces, West Midlands Police will start to share its footage directly with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The ability to collaborate using Evidence.com is a service that Axon has developed with the CPS. West Midlands Police also plans to use Evidence.com to store footage and images uploaded by the public. Both of these approaches will save resource and effort. For instance, case files and footage that must be burned to DVD are often hand or courier-delivered to the CPS at a major time and expense cost. And critically, with the new approach no footage can be lost or misplaced so avoiding fines that can run into the hundreds of thousands of pounds.

Concludes Will Salt: “At a time when crime isn’t falling but budget and manpower are, the cameras are helping our officers redress the balance by doing more, more efficiently. We plan to get more value from this platform, too – as we move forward we may roll out things like facial recognition technology to flag people of interest to our officers.”