

The Government call an end to ABC and challenges the Police to make the most of “these common sense cuts”

Is your Force ready to meet this challenge?

On the 16th February 2009 the Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced the Government is to scrap the annual police survey. This is indeed good news in the quest to reduce police bureaucracy, and is fully in line with the recommendations made by Sir Ronnie Flanagan and Jan Berry.

However the Home Secretary did make it clear that she expected police to use this opportunity to continue to improve their service delivery. To quote Ms Smith: “I challenge all police forces to make the most of these common sense cuts and trust the expertise of their officers to get down to business focussing on the issues that matter most to communities – driving down crime and driving up public confidence”.

Jan Berry, the former Police Federation boss, was brought in to scrutinise red tape in the Police Service. Her interim report ‘Reducing Bureaucracy in Policing’ has just been published, and is behind the sentiments voiced by the Home Secretary. The report calls for the scrapping of unnecessary paperwork and form filling. However, it stresses the need for Forces to be able to monitor, measure, compare and improve. Activity based costing did none of these – these were the views echoed by Flanagan, Berry and front-line officers – so it has rightly been discontinued.

These events have freed the Police from collecting generic data of questionable value. The challenge now is to use this spare capacity to provide essential information to enable the service to improve and adapt to every increasing demands.

In essence there is now an opportunity to ensure that information gathered, by any means, is targeted towards:

- improving efficiency
- being more effective by (focusing on the key issues)
- increasing productivity
- reducing waste
- streamlining processes

All of which will, of course, will reduce costs, or at least make better use of the resources available – hence reduce the need to increase costs.

The need to collect essential information to enable an organisation to operate efficiently has long been recognised in the private sector – Henry Ford pioneered these concepts over a century ago, and remains the key enabler of many modern business theories such as TQM (Total Quality Management), Kaizan, Six Sigma and Lean. It also underpins the QUEST programme recently introduced into the police service following the Flanagan report, and is clearly behind the “challenge” thrown down by the Home Secretary.

So, are you ready to meet this challenge?

To begin with, you have to take stock of where you are:

- What information do you need
- What information are you currently collecting
- Are you collecting it in the most efficient way
- Where are the gaps
- Where are the overlaps
- Who has responsibility for co-ordinating this information
- Who needs the information
- How will the information be used

The reports and the Minister have emphasised the need to use technology to improve the efficiency of the Police; mobile solutions are specifically mentioned.

So what data might you need? Each Force will have its own priorities and information needs. But basically these can be grouped into three areas:

Performance Data – efficiency, productivity, process improvement

The Government has asked each force to implement efficiency measures. The simplest way to do this is cutting posts – but this has limitations, it is hard to sustain, and will invariably lead to a degradation of services.

The proper sequence is:

- Measure existing processes
- Benchmark
- Identify best practice
- Identify changes to your processes to move towards best practice
- Do a cost-benefit analysis
- Implement the preferred option
- Measure the changes

The QUEST programme provides a framework for much of this. But in order to quantify the benefits and sustain the improvements you have to monitor (ie measure) your business and operational processes.

A process (or working procedure) will comprise a series of tasks that will result in an output (or outcome). To benchmark the process you will need to measure how long each task takes. Of course this is where Henry Ford introduced his Time and Motion clipboards. Depending on the processes under study there are a variety of options for data collection within the police service. Command and Control systems or Airwave can be useful for general operations duties. However this information is incomplete and/or not appropriate for many benchmarking exercises – although it can be used for some on-going monitoring or validation purposes.

Any information gathering process must be quick to implement, simple to use and provide rapid results.

Electronic data gathering systems – either on PCs or mobile devices – meet all of these requirements. These systems are simple to deploy, minimise data entry errors and are effective to manage. Plus, the data is immediately available for analysis.

Potential uses are:

- Targeted surveys: rapid, clinical deployment to officers and staff over a short timeframe to gather information on current processes and working practices. This provides the basic information for benchmarking and assessing where improvements can be made. Once changes have been implemented, the exercise can be repeated to confirm (or otherwise) that the expected benefits have been achieved. This gives

accurate, objective data for efficiency improvements, productivity gains and process improvements. It can also provide the data necessary to show a force is moving towards recognised best practice.

- Management Information: simple electronic forms can be used to record the types of tasks, the time spent on tasks, and volumes (ie how many times a task was done, the number of “outcomes” achieved, etc).
- Monthly, weekly or daily time recording: time recording systems are prevalent in the private sector. They are used for billing, costing and process monitoring.

Of course none of the above are popular within the public sector, and the now discredited ABC initiative is largely to blame for scepticism within the police service. But collecting performance data is an essential part of good business practice – it is an enabler for improving efficiency, streamlining processes and reducing waste.

A solicitor can tell you exactly how many phone calls they have made to justify their bill, but the Police struggle with vague anecdotal figures for why so much time is spent “in-station”. It is also why administration processes in many private companies are lean and inexpensive, but have been expanding at an alarming rate within the police service – unless you believe it is all to do with Government bureaucracy. A more likely reason is that processes, if left unchecked, will become increasingly more inefficient – systems tend towards chaos (second law of thermodynamics!).

Sustaining Changes from Strategic Programmes

There are many government-led and local initiatives aimed at modernisation of the police service, Citizen Focus, Policing Pledge, and the like.

Monitoring the outcomes of these changes and measuring the benefits (Benefits Realisation) are an essential – and often neglected – part of the process.

Thus two aspects need to be addressed:

- Did the expected **internal** changes actually happen – or are officers still operating the old practices and procedures.
- Have the changes has any **external** effect – ie do the general public / government agencies actually perceived we have improved.

Of course it is quite possible to achieve the first without achieving the second – in which case we chose the wrong solution to the problem.

To address the first point we again need to look at targeted surveys, management information and some type of time recording. We can also use other systems to measure changes in outputs. Has the detection rate improved? Are we processing prisoners more quickly? Have we reduced paperwork? Is car crime down? These are objective measures that, provided we introduce the appropriate (and efficient data collection system), will give us concrete measurements.

But they don’t give us the full picture. Why did we want to reduce paperwork? Possibly to free up officers time so they could spend more time “on the beat”. So we need to collect information on both time spent on paperwork, and time spent “on the beat” in order to assess the benefit.

Perceived improvements are subjective. We may have improved detection rates and reduced car crime, but does the general public actually feel safer? Public and staff questionnaires are the only way to measure subjective opinion.

Requests for Information, Targets and Other Performance Indicators

As part of this recent package of changes, the Government has said it will reduce the demand on the police to provide information. Reduce not eliminate. In addition, the police are answerable to the Police Authorities, the general public, and statutory/regulatory bodies.

The whole of the ABC programme was started in the 1990's because someone stood up in Parliament and asked the simple question "what percentage of their time do police officers spend in the station" – the rest is history. It is naïve to think that these questions will simply go away.

Activity Sampling (as distinct from ABC) has enable the police over the past decade to provide such information – albeit slightly out-of-date because of the overly complex, paper-based, and inefficient systems in place. Some information is available from operational systems, but it is incomplete and only covers front line officers.

In conclusion ...

As already stated: it is a very positive move by the Government to abandon the need of forces to submit ABC returns. This also removes the need for officers to "document every 15 minutes of their working day over a two-week period". But it does not say that Activity Sampling should be abandoned altogether. Indeed the Flanagan report commended Activity Sampling as a valuable management tool, and recommended that forces use the method to understand their performance and productivity, and as a means to monitor their demand profiles.

Couple this with the need to "prove" compliance to the policing pledge, and to focus more on the outcomes to the general public rather than the outputs to our internal change management programmes, and it is hard to see how we can avoid sustaining an efficient and focused data collection and survey function.

The gauntlet has been thrown down by the Home Office: they can rightly claim they have listened and acted upon the findings presented to them. With the demise of the discredited ABC programme and its associated annual data collection circus, they have freed up scarce resources. But the need for the police to manage efficiently and be seen to be improving has never been greater.

"you can't manage what you can't [don't] measure" – a quote attributed to several sources, including Lord Kelvin, W Edwards Deming (the pioneer of quality control), and Peter Drucker (often regarded as the father of modern management).

So the real challenge is not "should" you measure, but "how".

The solution ...

eForm Mobile and APRAIS. eForm has already proven itself within the police service as an efficient, affective and accurate method for collecting all manner of management information.

In the recent Activity Sampling survey in one force, results were published, including comparisons against last year on key local/national targets, within hours of the survey being completed. With an initial 87% return rate it showed that an efficient data collection method encourages participation and is not seen by the officers as intrusive. The powerful real-time monitoring and reporting capabilities ensured the progress was carefully managed.

eForm is designed to provide on-line (intranet and mobile) form deployment for Targeted Surveys, Benchmarking, Management Information (both qualitative and quantitative), time recording, (monthly, weekly, daily), staff/public questionnaires, Performance Indicator/Target metrics, and many other uses.