

Autonomy and visibility: The rewards of mobile working

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ANALYSIS:

Autonomy and visibility: The rewards of mobile working



22nd March 2021 [Martin Gallagher, Police Scotland](#)



What are the benefits of mobile working? When Police Scotland rolled out devices to 11,000 officers, they called on an independent academic team to assess the results - which were overwhelmingly positive. Chief Inspector Martin Gallagher, Deputy Business Lead, outlines the project, alongside Professor Lesley Diack of Robert Gordon University and Dr. William Graham of Abertay University.

Martin Gallagher, Chief Inspector, Deputy Business Lead, Mobile Working Project

We want to improve working practices so that people can be deployed in a way that best helps meet the needs and requirements of the communities we serve.

So when I was appointed to the Mobile Working Project to help facilitate the rollout of devices to almost 11,000 officers, I knew a challenging but rewarding task lay ahead.



The question that faced us was how to independently assess these benefits in a credible manner where the organisation would not be ‘marking its own homework’.

The addition of mobile technology would revolutionise how our community, response and specialist officers conducted their duties, providing them with instant access to information and increasing their visibility within our communities.

Researching the benefits of Mobile Working was an important factor that could help shape change for other projects within Police Scotland and also increase public confidence.

We scoped the project benefits as part of our business case but the question that faced us was how to independently assess these benefits in a credible manner where the organisation would not be ‘marking its own homework’.

Independent work

After extensive engagement with partners and stakeholders, we obtained very useful observations which helped us move forward with the proposal for an independent piece of work.

For further research and preparation, I met with business professionals within the public sector and discussed external consultancy, learning the pluses, pitfalls and costs.



In a Scottish Government gateway review it was acknowledged that this methodology has the potential to be sector-leading across public services.

I then met with senior academics (we are very lucky to be a partner in the Scottish Institute for Policing Research headed by Dr. Liz Aston to support our activities), took their advice and thereafter met with our Mobile Working Project commercial partners to discuss our plans.

All were convinced that there was a need to monitor the benefits (and disbenefits) the project achieved, in a credible manner that would withstand scrutiny. So, we commissioned an independent academic team to carry out research into the project, working with our own procurement team to inform a bespoke methodology.

Nothing of this nature has been attempted previously by the Service, and the proposal was subject to appropriately robust challenge prior to endorsement at executive level within Police Scotland.

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Professor Lesley Diack (Robert Gordon University) and Dr. William Graham (Abertay University)

The research project was an evaluation of part of the 'Digitally Enabled Policing Programme' (DEPP), the 'Police Scotland Mobile Working Project (MWP)' which is an ongoing project as part of the Police Scotland 'Serving a Changing Scotland Strategy'.



The MWP project equipped operational officers with a digital mobile policing solution to replace the traditional paper notebook system, to provide remote, live access to key policing information systems.

A research team from Robert Gordon University (RGU) and Abertay University was appointed to evaluate the implementation and impact of the national roll-out from October 2019 until November 2020, and to inform the final stages of roll-out to almost 11,000 police officers across Scotland.

The MWP project equipped operational officers with a digital mobile policing solution to replace the traditional paper notebook system, to provide remote, live access to key policing information systems. The research used a combined prospective and retrospective qualitative approach, triangulated with routinely collected online feedback from officers and quantitative data.

The main objectives were to identify long-term potential benefits and efficiencies to the officers, senior staff, and the public. However, the main data collection phase of the project had to be transformed because of the pandemic.

Frontline officers, sergeants and inspectors, civilian staff and senior police management were interviewed from five divisions (A, D, E, G, K) across Scotland.

From the initial observation stage of the project it was noted that preparation for the roll-out had been comprehensive and that the considered choice of device, software and network had been important.

The implementation phase of the rollout was led by the divisions themselves and this further added to the success. From the implementation stage evaluated by the research team potential long-term benefits were identified in five key areas with sub-themes as highlighted below:

Productivity

The feedback from frontline officers, sergeants and CID was that an efficiency was created because there were fewer delays with control room checks, access to systems, e.g., PNC and CHS, and this helped with non-duplication of tasks.

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There was a perception that this meant they were out and about more and the functionality of the device enabled officers to be more proactive.

As they were completing more checks than previously, they felt that this increased capacity. They highlighted the time saving that had been created which allowed them to access files and do other tasks while out.

This allowed them to manage their time in a better way including using any ‘downtime’ to complete other tasks. There was a perception that this meant they were out and about more and the functionality of the device enabled officers to be more proactive.

Information

The use of the mobile device and the search systems on it gave the officers better access to information and the facility to hold details on the device. The availability of more detailed information than through the control room, e.g., markers and warrants, gave them an information accuracy and an immediacy of information that was up-to-date.

Coupled with access to additional information sources such as the ability to access photographs across a range of incidents gave the frontline officer an added advantage.

This was increased when the information sharing potential was realised as the dissemination of information became much quicker and officers did not have to return to the office to photocopy notebooks or write up reports. Many commented that fingerprint access and the ability to be wiped remotely made the device more secure than the traditional notebook.



A Police Scotland constable using a Samsung Galaxy Note 9 in Dundee (Pic credit: Police Scotland)

Connectivity and Communication

One of the surprising findings of the project was the sense of connectivity that was created when officers were away from police premises. This was particularly felt by those officers who were normally based at partnership premises. Officers also felt that their external communication with the public and other agencies was made easier with the email and phone function on the mobile device.

There was a perception of increased visibility and presence on the street which allowed more proactive policing. Many of the interviewees reported that there had been a generally positive attitude from the public.

Supervisors mentioned that real time communication had improved and that access to statements and up-to-date information was quicker and easier. This was linked to information sharing and better team communication especially for supervisors with incidents such as missing persons

Officer wellbeing and safety

All who were interviewed perceived benefits to both officer wellbeing and safety. Topics mentioned were that being less office-based made the job easier, gave them fewer delays at the end of shift and importantly, anonymous access to welfare information.

Officer safety was also mentioned by many of the officers as they felt that being able to access background information gave them better awareness of what they may be walking into when attending incidents. There was increased officer morale reported with a feeling of being invested in by Police Scotland and they reported a sense of autonomy and greater control over their workload.

During the pandemic the devices became even more important as they allowed more social distancing, access to briefings and up-to-date information immediately. The quick release of the COVID-19 tickets was mentioned as a positive.

Technology and Culture Change

The devices were perceived as having a defining role in current policing and a transformational change on standard practice. Police officers' attitudes to technology were important to the successful uptake of the devices and previous experience with technology was a factor.

Members of the public's attitude to technology was surprising in that they expected the police to have mobile devices already and officers felt that they helped create a modern and professional image for Police Scotland.

There was a very positive attitude towards the adoption of the technology and there was a perception of a culture change with more flexible working arrangements.

The new working practices allowed the officers to be less office-based, more visible, with a crime prevention focus, but also created more autonomy and greater efficiency.

Officers perceived that they were less reliant on the control room, and on office-based computer facilities. Two other related themes were collaboration and improved relationships.

Across Police Scotland departments and divisions worked together to deliver the devices and this help to develop a trust especially with the use of the IT functions. There was also a perception that this might improve in the future and would also include external organisations.

Overall, the introduction of the mobile devices has been a very successful project with the majority of police officers at all levels realising multiple benefits in process, job satisfaction, safety and access to information.

The report “Mobile Working – Academic Evaluation of Project Benefits” is available [here](#) [PDF].

Main picture credit: [Ninian Reid/CC BY 2.0](#)

Authors' Note:

After the completion of this article Professor Lesley Diack died very suddenly.

Lesley made a significant contribution to many aspects of public life in Scotland through her academic work, and in particular in recent years to policing.

She will be sorely missed. We hope this final article she contributed to, and the successful project she led it tells of, is one part of a very worthy legacy.