

Public Safety Radio Communications Project

Martha Wooldridge, Project Director PSRCP, writes about one of the largest and most exciting PFI projects, a new radio strategy for the police.

PITO, the Police Information Technology Organisation, was established under statute as a Non-Departmental Public Body in April 1998. It is responsible for the Police National Computer, the Police National Network and for a wide range of IT solutions for the police including NAFIS and linked NSPIS systems.

One of the most significant responsibilities which PITO inherited from its predecessor unit in the Home Office was for negotiating a £1.5 bn-plus PFI (Private Finance Initiative) contract for the Public Safety Radio Communications Project (PSRCP). This will bring to the police throughout England and Wales – and, it is hoped, Scotland too – the benefits of a national, digital, trunked, multi-functional, encrypted radio service based on TETRA, the European standard which is being adopted in other countries in Europe for police and other emergency service communications.

Radio technology has been progressing rapidly in recent years and is now one of the most competitive and fast-growing technologies. For a variety of reasons, however, radio systems in police forces have not kept pace with technological developments and police working practices which rely on them have changed little over the past 30 years. All current police radio systems are local, with limited capacity for forces to talk to neighbours or to facilitate working in groups away from the direction of the control room. Interoperability with other emergency services is also poor, and was criticised in reports after the Hillsborough and Kings Cross disasters. Most forces' equipment cannot transfer data or text messages – a growing operational requirement. Few have any form of encryption and are open to listening in by anyone prepared to buy cheap scanning equipment. And almost every force has areas in which the police and other emergency services operate without effective radio coverage.

By the end of 2004, the majority of the existing police radio spectrum, which is subject to serious interference in some areas, will be withdrawn. It will be replaced by a new spectrum of superior quality, dedicated to use by public safety organisations, on which users will be required to use digital equipment. Knowledge of this change reinforced the need, already identified by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the Home Office, for a new radio strategy. A Review of Radio Communications in the Police and Fire Services of England and Wales was inaugurated, a parallel review was carried out in Scotland, and PSRCP was born.

ACPO decided that future policing demands required a radio service which:

- Operated on a national basis.
- Provided guaranteed levels of coverage and service.
- Provided voice, text and data.
- Could be used to access vital databases, such as the Police National Computer, from vehicles or hand-held radios.
- Would enable officers to work in separate 'talk-groups'.
- Would allow seamless communications with officers in neighbouring forces and across the country.
- Would be encrypted to such a high standard that only a determined professional would have any chance of intercepting police radio communications. As a final bonus,
- Would give each officer a panic button which he could press in an emergency and which would immediately alert his control room and colleagues. This last feature is already in use in the MPD with impressive results. Eventually, pressing the button will instantly tell the con-

trol room where the officer is located, to an accuracy of a few metres.

It was decided that the project should go forward with PFI funding. As part of a full-blown European competition, three consortia qualified to submit tenders, but two of them had withdrawn by the design stage, leaving a BT-led consortium as the sole bidder. In December 1999, BT was instructed to proceed with initial investment in the project and the final framework arrangement between BT and PITO should be signed in January or February 2000. Individual police authorities will also sign their own service contracts with BT.

The project has a number of notable features apart from its technical capabilities:

It is a major national infrastructure project, which will facilitate better and more efficient service to the public through joined-up emergency services, with the possibility of fire, ambulance, coastguard, mountain rescue and a range of other public safety agencies all using PSRCP and enjoying interoperability. It will replace fragmented, locally-financed and procured police radio systems, in-house or outsourced, with a centrally-procured service taken by all forces to ensure interoperability, and which is funded 80% centrally. It offers the police an opportunity for radical changes in police working practices with remote radio access to information, the ability to work in talk groups and with other forces and agencies, more effective supervision and the possibility of spending more time on patrol and less at the police station.

All IT projects represent a risk, and government IT projects have an uncertain reputation. PSRCP is so large and important to the future of policing and the potential for joined-up government that failure is hard to contemplate. Success, on the other hand, will demonstrate that it is possible for the public and private sectors to co-operate effectively and to their mutual benefit in a major undertaking of this sort. It will boost confidence in the public sector's ability to define the service required and to negotiate a good price and contract terms. And it may also help the private sector in coming to terms with the risks of PFI.

The PSRCP contract will last for 19 years and the project team has placed particular emphasis on mitigating the risks of such a long-term arrangement. Risk reduction measures include the following:

- The main contract negotiations were preceded by product definition studies which essentially required the contractor to demonstrate that it could provide the service.
- Because there was only one bidder, a special costing model was devised in addition to the Public Sector Comparator, to ensure that the price offered by BT represented value for money.

- The rollout to forces will be dependent upon the successful evaluation of a pilot service in Lancashire.
- There is a remedies and damages regime if specified service levels fail or there are delays in the rollout.
- There are measures to prevent the contractor terminating the contract just because it becomes financially burdensome to continue it.

The framework arrangement is due to be signed around the end of January and the service contracts in February. The project then moves into its implementation phase, with the pilot beginning in the autumn and the rollout to other forces commencing next year. The PSRCP team will remain in place to support and educate forces in rollout, to manage the central elements of the contract, and to oversee technological developments.

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