

# Technical revolution

**The days of CID offices being piled high with audio and video tapes of witness and suspect interviews could be a thing of the past. A project by the National Interview Group could revolutionise the way the service conducts major crime investigation. Carol Jenkins reports**

The hit BBC TV series *Life on Mars* highlighted just how far policing has come over the past 30 years in the way it investigates major crime and treats suspects and witnesses.

British police are now considered world leaders in the use of investigative techniques such as DNA as well as our approach to suspect interviewing. It became the first in the world to introduce audio recordings of suspects following the introduction of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. Yet while these important areas have evolved and developed – the

technology used to conduct suspect and witness interviews has remained virtually unchanged since the 1970s.

Walk into any interview room in any police station around the country and you will see the same old fashioned tape recording machines using audio tapes that the majority of us in the ‘outside world’ consigned to a car boot sale or the bin long ago.

Recognising that police use of technology in investigative interviewing needs a good push into the 21st century, members of the National Interview Group are driving

a project that they hope will see the introduction of new technology in every force in the coming years.

The group is made up of frontline officers and other practitioners from around the country in the field of investigative interviewing that disseminate best practice and provide support for officers in the 43 forces.

Gary Shaw is the NPIA's national investigative interviewing advisor and co-ordinator, a former Northumbria officer who specialised for most of his career in criminal investigation.

One of its members, Det Ch Insp

Andrew Griffiths from Sussex Police has been leading the project which he hopes will see an end to old fashioned tapes and the introduction of a new networked solution. He believes this will for the first time allow for the recording of both audio and video interviews in one central secure server. Access to stored interviews will be by a desktop PC.

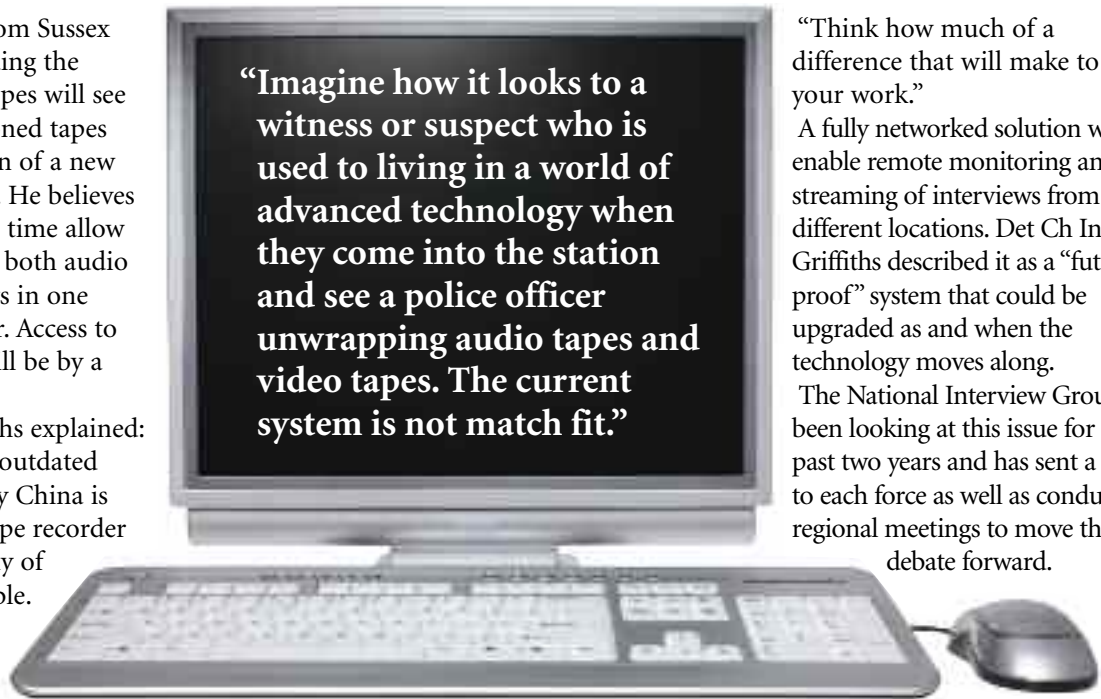
Det Ch Insp Griffiths explained: "We are using such outdated technology that only China is currently making tape recorder heads and the supply of audio tapes is variable.

"Imagine how it looks to a witness or suspect who is used to living in a world of advanced technology when they come into the station and see a police officer unwrapping audio tapes and video tapes. The current system is not match fit."

Despite the fact that the majority of force recognise it is time to change – what has been holding them back is the risks associated with any change in the technology. Concerns include the fact that all 43 forces will adopt different solutions and that the picture will be fragmented. One important consideration is that any new system should be Police and Criminal Evidence Act compliant and able to withstand the rigours of any possible challenge by the defence in court.

Public confidence and also confidence from other criminal justice partners is also a key consideration. Taking these key concerns on board, the National Interview Group looked at the possibility of recommending forces replace their audio and video tape recording equipment with CD and DVD recorders.

Det Ch Insp explains the reasons why the group discounted this particular option: "You would get the same issue with the bulk storage and no improvements in efficiency. "The fact that this technology is advancing so rapidly means that any



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solution we adopt will quickly become outdated and we will find ourselves back in the same situation in five years time looking for a new solution."

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The introduction of a networked solution would bring numerous benefits to the police service and the justice system as a whole suggests Det Ch Insp Griffiths. Benefits include the fact that it will modernise major crime investigation, increase efficiency and public confidence in the justice system. It will also lead to an improvement in the care of victims and witnesses and ensure that the police service can withstand scrutiny from external agencies.

"Imagine if you have a burglar in custody and as part of your interview preparation you are easily able to access the last three interviews for when this guy was last in custody," says Det Ch Insp Griffiths.

"Think how much of a difference that will make to your work."

A fully networked solution would enable remote monitoring and the streaming of interviews from different locations. Det Ch Insp Griffiths described it as a "future proof" system that could be upgraded as and when the technology moves along.

The National Interview Group has been looking at this issue for the past two years and has sent a letter to each force as well as conducting regional meetings to move the debate forward.

It has also consulted with the Home Office and organisations representing the defence community such as the Criminal Defence Solicitors Association, Legal Services Commission, Law Society as well as other organisations such as the Crown Prosecution Service. Each organisation has expressed their support for a new networked solution and has indicated that they want to work with the group on the project.

The group has worked with the Home Office Scientific Development Branch (HOSDB) to produce a minimum specification for the technology. It has also consulted with commercial suppliers to ensure they develop the right equipment for police use.

Det Ch Insp Griffiths emphasises that the project is not just aimed at introducing a new technology solution but wants to see real benefits across policing as a whole in terms of the way it conducts its business.

"This presents us with a major opportunity to vastly increase our business efficiency, professionalism and improve on public confidence. We will also have for the first time the opportunity to combine both the suspect and witness interview disciplines onto one solution."