



Here's looking at you

Complaints against police officers in one West Midlands Operational Command Unit fell after they began recording incidents using head-cams
Tina Orr Munro reports

The head-cam headsets were introduced as part of a Home Office evaluation, which could be rolled out nationally by the end of this year. The headsets have been tested by different teams in West Midlands Police by police officers, specials and community support officers.

Officers at Little Park Street Operational Command Unit in the West Midlands are now using several of the devices although the Home Office granted pilot status to Plymouth, currently trialling 60 head-cams.

The head-cams digitally record a scene from the perspective of the officer wearing them, including any conversation that takes place. Their primary role is to help gather and preserve evidence in public order situations, but an unexpected spin-off has been their impact on complaints made against the police.

PC Lee Crofts, a trainer at Little Park Street, wears a head-cam when he goes to incidents. He says wearing the gadget enabled him to disprove a complaint of assault and racism made against him in just five minutes.

"I had gone to a domestic violence call. There was no suggestion of violence, but the suspect was in breach of bail and I had gone to arrest him. The man answered the door. He accepted that he shouldn't be there and I made the arrest. We returned to the cell and it was perfectly calm and amicable.

"When he got a solicitor, he started to say I had picked on him. He was clutching at straws, throwing mud, but he insisted on making a complaint of assault and racism against me. I was offended. I was more than happy to play the headcam footage back to him because I knew I hadn't been over zealous in my arrest. I pressed rewind and played it to the solicitor who not only advised his client to withdraw the allegations, but also got him to apologise to me."

The head-cam, which is worn right next to the ear, has also been useful in terms of use of force justification because it records that the person was warned and the correct procedures were followed before CS spray or other action was taken.

“It makes what we do open and transparent,” adds PC Crofts.

Sgt Lee Burns, also from Little Park Street Operational Command Unit, has been directly involved in sharing good practice on the use of head-cams and has contributed to the national guidelines on the roll out of the system due to be published at the end of the year. He teaches officers how to get the best out of wearing the device.

He says rather than attracting attention from offenders and turning the officers wearing the head-cams into a target, they have had the opposite effect.

“I recommend the fourth or fifth officer wears the head-cam so they

record not only the incident, but how officers deal with it. It has stopped numerous complaints.”

The head-cam is already proving to be highly versatile in terms of gathering evidence. One of its most effective uses is in domestic violence situations where it is able to record the direct aftermath of the incident which can be replayed to a court at a later date.

“Officers have been threatened and then the offender spots the head-cam and their complete demeanour changes. They become very compliant. They don't want to be captured on camera doing something that could incriminate them.”

“They are worn in a range of incidents such as traffic incidents, domestic violence and stand off situations. It shows the demeanour of a suspect directly after an incident has taken place, as well as the aftermath. It could be overturned furniture or the emotional upset of a child, but it shows the courts what the person in front of them is capable of,” says Sgt Burns.

Mentors also wear them on patrol with their students and use them in debriefing sessions. CSOs also regularly wear them.

“We have had CSOs walking towards a group of youths who spot the camera and instantly disperse. It is a massive protection for them. They know police officers are wearing them and CSOs patrol with them.”

As with any piece of technical equipment, there have been teething difficulties. In the early days, downloading the footage could take three days which made it difficult for officers to check that their written notes corresponded to what was seen and heard on the head-cam. Now it takes just five minutes. The one-size-fits-all approach has also caused some problems.

“I have a large head so it can start to ache a bit if you wear it all the time, so you have to take it off and just put in on when you go to a job,” says PC Crofts.

Sgt Burns says they are also currently searching for a system that is more police-proof.

“We are looking at the technical side. We need equipment that has a two stage switch off, so it can't switch itself off which can happen if the switch is accidentally knocked. We also need lighter, more robust equipment.”

He also admits that some officers were unenthusiastic at the prospect of wearing a camera, but most have recognised its potential.

“Some have jumped at the chance to wear it because it preserves excellent evidence. Some find it a bit intrusive and we are doing our best to minimise this.”



Photography: Graham Beddingfield

