

Illustration: Lisa Ryszkowska

Making an impact?

A year after the launch of a new intelligence system, set up to ensure police officers in different forces can access information across borders, Ian Muir, from the IMPACT Programme, speaks to officers using the system to see what impact, if any, it has made

The IMPACT Programme was launched after a shortfall of information sharing between forces in England and Wales was highlighted by the horrific murders of school girls Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman. Convicted killer Ian Huntley managed to slip through the net and gain a job as a caretaker at a school.

The subsequent Bichard Inquiry was launched which looked at a number of issues including vetting practices and information sharing. One of the issues raised was that the 43 forces hold more than 65 million operational records in 270 separate local databases, which have not communicated with each other historically. Information collected by one force was simply not visible to colleagues in other forces.

Forces have been hampered by artificial geographical and system boundaries – this has allowed criminals to operate across force boundaries.

“In the past, doing child protection investigations, we were basically limited to our own force information system,” explains PC Elaine Cook, from Bedfordshire Police.

“It was only by chance that we discovered information held by other forces. You can’t underestimate the importance of the IMPACT Nominal Index (INI), which for the first time allows us to know if other forces hold information that can help us with our investigations and to make better decisions.”

By stripping away from criminals the sanctuary of these artificial boundaries, the IMPACT Programme aims to enhance the ability of the police service to share information, improving its effectiveness nationally and locally.

Currently being used primarily for child protection activities, the INI is the first step into the new era for linking and sharing information across forces. No longer should criminals arrive in a new area with, effectively, a clean slate. A quick check on the INI central database should identify instantly if there is any information held on a suspect, not only in your own area, but also in any of the 43 forces in England and Wales.

Det Sgt Simon James, who has been responsible for introducing the INI into the Wiltshire Constabulary, believes that the system is allowing officers to assess risk far more efficiently than in the past. “INI enables officers to achieve a better understanding of the level of risk that an individual presents to the community,” he says. “Officers using the INI system discover a great deal of relevant information about individuals that they are checking. This gives them greater confidence, particularly when they are making decisions affecting vulnerable children.”

Det Sgt James reports that no fewer than 24 officers from the Wiltshire Constabulary have applied for training using the INI system.

“Over the past 12 months INI has demonstrated the huge contribution that it can make in preventing and detecting crime. As a result, increasing numbers of our officers are keen to use the system, and we anticipate the number of checks that we currently undertake rising significantly from the current level of 220 each month.”

Det Sgt Steve McCormick, Gloucestershire Constabulary, also says that police officers have been involved in designing the system.

“Essentially, this is a system designed by police officers for police officers.”

The INI contains 43 million names drawn from paper and computer records, feeding six key business areas of policing: crime, custody, intelligence, domestic violence, firearms and child protection. Following a match, officers can request the records about that person via a telephone call, fax or secure email.

While this will be a manual process for the time being, the launch of the INI is the first major step towards the sharing of intelligence and other operational information between forces.

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The entire programme is underpinned by the Code of Practice on the Management of Police Information (MoPI), which together with its associated guidance is designed to ensure that police operational information is recorded, reviewed, shared and deleted on a reliable and consistent basis across the entire police service.

The next step in the journey will be the IMPACT Cross Regional Information Sharing Project (CRISP), which will be a vital building block in the creation of a national information sharing capability. It will provide forces with the ability to access on a ‘read only’ basis, operational information held by other forces – that is the information itself, not just an index of where the information is held.

The culmination of the IMPACT Programme will be the Police National Database (PND) in 2010, which will provide a powerful one stop shop for searching across forces’ main operational information systems and national police systems,

including information currently provided by the Police National Computer (PNC).

Det Sgt Martin Bingham, Gloucestershire Constabulary, said: “IMPACT has the ability to transform policing in the 21st century. Its capacity is astronomical. With the INI system we can see that another force holds information. In the future, we will be able to type a name in the PND system and get access to information directly. When that happens, IMPACT will be a truly transformational tool, not only for Child Abuse Investigation Units, but also for every police officer in the country.”

Case study

Social Services asked for help with identifying potential risks within a family that had recently been allowed to adopt two children about whom concerns were now being raised. In an interview between Social Services and the “father”, the latter admitted to not declaring that he had changed his name three times by Deed Poll and had been convicted of a sexual assault. Neither the PNC nor the local police held records for him in his current name.

Research on the INI identified a range of information indicating a significant risk to the adopted children that included:

- Four further names he had not admitted to, using the same date of birth;
- Connections with other addresses not previously disclosed that were of interest to police;
- A conviction for indecent assault on a niece he had not admitted to;
- He had a young child of his own through another relationship.

Facts and figures

- 43 million records held by the INI central database.
- 72,000 INI checks undertaken, leading to 6,500 requests for information between January and October 2006.
- More than 2,500 pieces of important information identified that would not otherwise have been available if a check had not been made on INI.
- Better informed decisions are being taken which are dramatically impacting on the lives and safety of dozens of children each year. This includes decisions relating to the placement of and/or access to a child and increases in the likelihood of prosecution.

For further information look at www.pito.pnn.police/microsite/impact/