

Police intelligence?

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In 2001 Ian Huntley was appointed to Soham Village College. This led to the horrendous murders of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells for which Huntley was convicted on 17 December 2003. The heinous crime and the unimaginable grief for the families of the girls shocked the nation. It became clear that Huntley had been known by the police since 1995 in relation to various sexual offences. It defied belief that this information failed to come to light during the appointment process in 2001. This revelation ultimately led to the Bichard Inquiry into child protection procedures in Humberside police and Cambridgeshire Constabulary, particularly the effectiveness of relevant intelligence-based record keeping, vetting practices since 1995 and information sharing with other agencies.

The Bichard Report was published on 22 June 2004. This edition of ETHicol looks at some of the information systems issues raised by the report (the numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs or recommendations in the report).

According to the report the current situation across the 43 police forces in England and Wales is not good. There is no common IT system for managing criminal intelligence (3.61). Indeed this strategic objective was removed from the national police IT strategy in 2000 as it was unachievable because lacks of funds. Without a strong implemented national strategy it is hardly surprising that police forces cannot share intelligence. Indeed Bichard found (3.63) that each police force has a variety of IT systems that are being used for many different purposes. Interfaces between systems at force-to-force level are almost non-existent. It is incredible that it was discovered that even within forces system interaction has been patchy at best.

Bichard found contradictory evidence regarding information management. "The National Intelligence Model (NIM) [exists as] a management framework that requires police forces to analyse and address the methods by which intelligence is obtained, created, stored and used. Its aim is to enhance intelligence-led policing." (3.64) However, it was discovered that it had done little in reality. There remains "a lack of clear, national guidance for the police about information management - the way in which information is recorded[,] reviewed, retained or deleted" (3.66). It was found that each police force had its local interpretation of NIM (3.81) which clearly makes intelligence sharing virtually impossible.

Of the 31 recommendations made in the report, 11 related directly to IT. Many others had implications for IT in that effective vetting was not possible without computerised

criminal intelligence support that worked. The recommendations recognise that attempts had been made to improve the situation but there is implication of these being too little, too late and too slow. The 11 specific recommendations were:

- A national IT system for England and Wales to support police intelligence should be introduced as a matter of urgency (1).
- The pilot PLX system, which flags that intelligence is held about someone by particular police forces, should be introduced in England and Wales by 2005 (2).
- The procurement of IT systems by the police should be reviewed to ensure that, wherever possible, national solutions are delivered to national problems (3).
- Investment should be made available by Government to secure the Police National Computer's (PNC) medium and long-term future, given its importance to intelligence-led policing and to the criminal justice system as a whole (4).
- The planned new Code of Practice, made under the Police Reform Act 2002, dealing with the quality and timeliness of PNC data input, should be implemented as soon as possible (5). The planned new Code of Practice, made under the Police Reform Act 2002, dealing with the quality and timeliness of PNC data input, should be implemented as soon as possible (5).
- The quality and timeliness of PNC data input should be routinely inspected (6).
- The transfer of responsibility for inputting court results onto the PNC should be reaffirmed by the Court Service and the Home Office and, if possible, accelerated ahead of the 2006 target (7).
- A Code of Practice should be produced covering record creation, review, retention, deletion and information sharing. This needs to be clear, concise and practical. It should supersede existing guidance (8).
- The Code of Practice must clearly set out the key principles of good information management (capture, review, retention, deletion and sharing), having regard to policing purposes, the rights of the individual and the law (9).
- The Code of Practice must set out the standards to be met in terms of systems (including IT), accountability, training, resources and audit. These standards should be capable of being monitored (10).
- The Code of Practice should have particular regard to the factors to be considered when reviewing the retention or deletion of intelligence in cases of sexual offences (11).

The obviousness of these recommendations is frightening. How could good practice and commonsense be so lacking in such an important area of computing? What sort of input and influence did IS professionals have in the strategic development and implementation of computerised criminal intelligence support? If they had concerns did they raise them and were they ignored? It is interesting that Bichard does not address the role and influence of the IS professionals in this situation. It seems this is a crucial issue.

If ever there was a poignant example of the need for joint decision making and action by strategists and technologists within the information systems field this is it. We cannot say that relevant and timely information provided to those appointing Huntley would have prevented the murders but it would have reduced the likelihood of opportunity. For information systems professionals it is a salutary reminder of our obligations to society and our responsibility to provide systems that sustain and promote public good.

Reference. (<http://www.bichardinquiry.org.uk/>)

Please send your views on ethical and social responsibility issues and cases of ethical dilemmas to:

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