

# Police Digital Service embracing the future with confidence

The National Policing Digital Strategy is hugely ambitious, setting out goals to respond to complex criminality, accelerating levels of cyber-crime and the borderless nature of crime against a backdrop of the enduring challenge around efficiency, effectiveness and funding. I ask Police Digital Service CEO Ian Bell how his organisation is helping police forces by supporting and enabling the change required to meet these challenges.

**Words: Catherine Levin, Editor, Emergency Services Times**

"The strategy is all things collaboration," says Ian. "It needed to have ambition, desire and a focus on the challenge policing faces. We wanted to set a tone about what we could achieve. We wanted to be bold and that means changing the culture. It was the right place to start."

The refresh of the ten-year Strategy is ongoing and the job of the Police Digital Service (PDS) is to influence, to encourage, to facilitate and bring people together to create solutions. Ian cautions against adopting old stereotypes about technology. "It's not just about IT anymore; it's about the collective system that embraces digital, data, and increasingly security."

## Commitment at a strategic level

The ambition is noble, but the execution requires commitment at a strategic level – both policing leaders and politicians in the form of the Police and Crime Commissioners. Ian says that they, along with the Home Office, have been consistently supportive of PDS and the development of the Strategy. He accepts that busy day jobs limit what policing leaders can do to commit to national efforts like PDS. He works closely with Durham Chief Constable, Jo Farrell who is the National Police Chiefs' Council lead on digital and data.

Ian talks about leaders 'leaning in' and understanding the ambition they need to have to meet the demands of policing. "We've got leaders who are corraling their colleagues to think about the delivery framework for the future. We are far from the place where every technology problem was once addressed 43 times."

**"We need to understand new ways of working and what we want from a modern workforce."**

## Avoiding derailment

The work that PDS is doing with police forces to set the long-term ambition for digital, data and security can of course be derailed by the latest report or headline. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue regularly publishes reports about police forces and technology is a regular topic of interest as it enables so much of the delivery of services to the public. It must be hard for senior leaders and PCCs to manage the need to react but also keep a steady hand on the long-term direction of travel.



*Ian Bell, CEO of the Police Digital Service.*

How does PDS learn from HMICFRS and others so that it can influence policy and practice? Ian explains, "We have a watching brief on all forms of assessment. We need to engage strategically with the HMI assessments and look in more detail at how technology forms part of the PEEL process." He stresses the benefit to PDS of the evidence base that comes from these reports as they too inform the direction of travel as the strategy evolves.

## It's more than skills

We talk about what skills police forces need to deliver the Strategy. Ian immediately broadens out the conversation. "My perspective is wider than skills. It is about culture, acceptance and adoption. We need to understand new ways of working and what we want from a modern workforce. We should envisage something that is sustainable and scalable and will continue to evolve. This should point us towards the skills we need, locally and nationally." He cites the role of the College of Policing supporting skill development in areas like cyber security and the National Police Technology Council work to map a skills path from recruitment through all stages of the career.

None of which will address the problem of police forces who are competing for staff who can command vastly higher salaries in the private sector. He accepts that police forces will have salary limitations that will restrict the pool of candidates, but he says that policing should grow its own talent, making best use of apprentices, internships and building a pathway that encourages staff to stay in policing because it provides a stimulating environment in which to develop and thrive.

## All about AI

One way of providing that environment is the opportunity to explore new tools and new ways of working. Artificial Intelligence may offer just that and

with the stream of news stories about the merits or otherwise of ChatGPT, can PDS harness generative AI to benefit policing?

We talk about by Ian Hogarth in a recent weekend edition of the Financial Times. He is an angel investor in tech start-ups working with AI and he, along with an increasing list of well-known tech people, says that it is time to slowing down and think more carefully about the use of AI.

Ian responds, "The conversation we're trying to encourage in policing is about the purpose and ethical use of AI. Of course, we have a massive interest and curiosity but there are some things here where we proceed with caution and part of that is adopting a security by design approach."

He returns to the Strategy and says he is excited about the potential of AI but wants to get the policy right first. "We have to be trusted and credible and be in the right place to exploit AI to best effect." One way in which could be helpful is in procurement. The Institute for Government hosted a webinar where a panel looked at how AI could be usefully applied in public sector procurement. This is new to PDS and Ian says that his organisation is working in close partnership with Blue Light Commercial to develop future procurement approaches and the AI potential sits squarely as part of that.

## Stimulating the future

PDS will host its annual Summit in September with a tag line of Stimulating the Future. Ian says that he wants policing to, "Embrace the future with confidence." The gathering in Brighton, one week before The Emergency Services Show, is a chance to reflect on the past three years and plot a collaborative way forward in line with the Strategy.

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