

Report to Walsall South Area Panel
Surveillance in Walsall
4 February 2014

Introduction

Panel members have expressed concerns about CCTV in the area due to a limited availability of cameras, high levels of anti-social behaviour (ASB) and the perceived effectiveness of CCTV in tackling these issues.

This report seeks to update panel members of the current situation in terms of the use of surveillance in tackling crime and ASB. This information is limited to that which is available to the Community Safety Team, as the Surveillance Team now sits within Social Care and Inclusion.

There are currently approx 30 re-deployable cameras in the authorities stock, ownership of which sit mainly within the Area Partnership and Community Safety Teams. These are predominantly Dome Hawks, around one third of which are awaiting repair with associated costs ranging from around £100 upwards per unit.

There are approx 18 fixed cameras in the town centre area, four of which are currently out of commission: two in Park Street and two in Butlers Passage.

In addition, there are a number of small covert cameras (costing approx £200 each) that were purchased with the support of Area Partnerships to assist Environmental Health with their investigations into fly-tipping and other issues.

Report

The use of surveillance in tackling crime and ASB is widely regarded by practitioners and the community as vital, not only in providing a source of evidence collection, but in providing reassurance to communities and residents that their safety is being considered and is of paramount importance.

However, there are many factors to be taken into account when assessing the efficacy and suitability of surveillance: is the equipment being used right for the job? Is it reliable? Is the use of surveillance necessary and proportionate? If the intention is to record evidence on a specific case, there are additional factors to consider. Is there sufficient lighting to support the recording of clear images? If the camera is not 'wi-fi' enabled, is there staff capacity available to carry out downloads? Will the images be of sufficient quality to be acceptable as evidence in a prosecution? Does the camera have the capacity to record good quality images at night? If the camera is in place to reassure communities, often, its very presence can achieve that. However, should incidents occur and the camera fails to record them, this can negatively

impact upon the credibility of agencies and, most importantly, mean that evidence is not collected to support a prosecution, possibly leaving victims vulnerable.

The re-deployable cameras available for use at the moment are, in the main, several years old. As they become more unreliable, the question must be asked 'are further repairs actually cost effective?' The majority of re-deployable cameras are Dome Hawks, with some of the more recent purchases being Apache. Obviously, technology has moved forward considerably since Dome Hawks were originally purchased. Although they continue to provide us with an excellent tool for providing reassurance to communities, there have been issues with reliability, making their use for collection of evidence somewhat problematic at times. Looking at the number of Dome Hawk deployments against the amount of evidence collected that has actually supported enforcement action, it is clear there is a significant imbalance.

This may be due to a number of factors: poor quality images, unit malfunction or, more positively, that the mere presence of a camera has deterred would-be perpetrators. There is no doubt that as a visible deterrent and to provide reassurance, the Dome Hawk is a useful tool. However, the number of occasions when the cameras have proved to be ineffective has increased over recent months. That, coupled with the number of these ageing cameras that require repair suggest that a full review of re-deployable capacity is well-timed.

In terms of the fixed surveillance cameras within the town centre, there are some significant issues at present. A considerable investment has been made in recent years in order to effect the move of the surveillance unit from the Saddlers Centre to its current location. Unfortunately, there remain four cameras within key locations that are not controllable from the new site or are not in working order. Minimum current estimate to rectify the issues with these cameras is around £20K. It should also be noted that many of the fixed cameras themselves have not been upgraded for many years, so may be inefficient in terms of their technical capability.

Staffing of the control room itself is usually done on a single officer basis which can compromise their ability to respond to issues, deal with police, radios etc., Hot-spot areas such as the bus station are now covered by CCTV which is controlled by other agencies i.e. Centro who now have a state of the art control room based in Birmingham. Similarly, whg now have an excellent facility based at their main town centre office that houses some of the most up to date surveillance equipment. Obviously, this is primarily used in their multi-occupancy blocks and key locations. It should also be borne in mind that many partner organisations are not governed by RIPA requirements in the same way as the local authority. Indeed, the recent changes to RIPA have presented local authority ASB practitioners with a significant challenge. Previously, directed surveillance could be authorised 'in-house', providing the request met stringent checks. New regulations suggest that authorisation now needs to be sought from the Magistrates Court, although there remains a lack of clarity on this point.

An approx. cost of purchasing upgraded re-deployable cameras would depend upon the number purchased and ranges between £4,000 and £6,000 per camera, plus the additional costs previously outlined. Six cameras, plus costs could come in the region of £50,000.

Investment as indicated above, includes much more than the purchase of the camera itself. Consideration must be given to sim cards, maintenance and fitting costs. These are year on year costs and sustainability over a prolonged period must also be addressed. These on going costs and the speed at which technology changes may make the leasing of cameras a more viable option and costs associated with this have been explored. In addition whether we look to purchase or lease additional units the cost charged by AMEY to install and move these cameras also needs to be considered.

Leasing/Renting

A quote has been obtained indicating that a NOMAD re-deployable camera can be rented at a cost of £1895 per year including all repairs and maintenance. These agreements are annual, include all repair and servicing and the equipment can be replaced every three years. Further investigation is required in respect of this specifically around the additional cost for 3/4G capability (£290 per camera) and the additional charges and logistical issues with AMEY associated with deployment, plus control room capacity in terms of equipment and staffing.

In conclusion, Panel is advised that work is currently underway to review both fixed and re-deployable camera stock with a view to supporting and informing members' future decision making.

Although the use of surveillance continues to be a useful tool in tackling crime and ASB, there is no doubt that significant financial investment is required in order to ensure equipment is effective and efficient.

An in-depth review is exploring options to support future development which may be more cost effective, such as leasing, rather than purchasing out right. Obviously, there is much to consider beyond the purchase of the cameras themselves, not least the capacity of the control room equipment to house upgraded technology and the staffing capacity to support its use.

Recommendation

That the Panel notes this update and re-visits the topic once a comprehensive review of surveillance capacity is completed.

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