

## **Airwave**

### **Driver – Technology**

Related Drivers –Counter Terrorism, Collaborative Working Between Forces, Incident Management, 2012 Olympics, Public Confidence in the Police, Jean Charles de Menzes Shooting

#### **Background**

Airwave allows front-line officers to communicate directly, conduct enquiries and complete administrative tasks remotely, thus freeing up dispatch or control staff to concentrate on other duties. In the thematic inspection by HMIC, *Beyond the Call*, inspectors recommended that forces could capitalise on this by making better use of the system's ability to send patrol officer status updates from the handheld terminal to command and control systems: one force doing this has reduced traffic through the control centre by almost 60 per cent.<sup>1</sup>

The system also makes it easier for officers to access advice from supervisors and control room staff. In order to maximise the benefits to the control room, inspectors stated forces should consider:

- making better use of status updates to relieve pressure on the control room
- integrating Airwave status messaging in command and control systems
- integrating locally procured force IT systems with Airwave
- training operational staff in using alternative methods of communication and IT
- developing new working practices for control room and operational staff.

A recommendation from *Beyond the Call* is that training for staff and supervisors should include a module explaining the full range of services available through the Airwave package and highlighting the potential benefits.

Despite the benefits that Airwave has brought, the Police Federation expressed concern about the ability of the network to cope with large-scale events such as the forthcoming Olympics. Ninety-two percent of delegates at the Police Federation annual conference in May 2008 voted that the system is "inadequate", the then-Vice Chair, Alan Gordon, saying it "would struggle to cope with a well-attended egg and spoon race, let alone with the 2012 Olympics".<sup>2</sup>

The Academy of Engineering explained the cause of the problem:

*The amount of voice traffic is now reaching the limits of the current system's spectrum resources in some areas (particularly in London). This suggests that the Airwave system will be inadequate for the future needs of the police forces, particularly in densely populated areas where information needs are likely to exceed the TETRA network's capacity.*

*Airwave has limited (narrow) bandwidth and data capability. Existing equipment is capable of carrying more traffic but additional spectrum is required. Rather than use another band it would be easier and less expensive to expand the band assigned to Airwave to the full range. In the UK, military users occupy the part of the band not assigned to Airwave, so this expansion would need to be managed carefully.<sup>3</sup>*

The Airwave radio network can struggle to cope where a very large number of users are concentrated in the same area. The Home Affairs Select Committee is concerned about the potential for the network to fail during the Olympic 2012 games, given the numbers of officers who will be deployed. They recommend the Home Office should address this as a matter of urgency, including consideration of expanding the radio band assigned to Airwave.

It was noted by the committee that radio communication between tunnel and surface is now possible through most of the London Underground network. This is of particular importance should the system once again be subject to terrorist attack.

### **Potential Skills Needs**

**Communication skills** – specifically in the use of Airwave for both front line officers and police staff

**Technical skills** – to ensure Airwave has the capacity to function fully during the 2012 Olympic Games and officers and staff are trained in expansion to the service

<sup>1</sup> [HMIC \(2007\) \*Beyond the Call: Thematic inspection of police contact centres' contribution to incident management.\* London: HMIC.](#)

<sup>2</sup> Police Review (23 May 2008) "Airwave 'not up to' Olympic qualification", p 4.

<sup>3</sup> [House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee \(2008\) \*Policing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.\* Seventh Report of the 2007-08 Session. HC 364-I, London: The Stationery Office Ltd.](#)