

Appendix A: Article on Hampshire E-Mail Project

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Hampshire E-Mail Project

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The complexity and diversity of paper-based transactions involving memorandums, letters, various forms and documents within the individual organisations which comprise the criminal justice system is all too apparent to anyone working in these organisations. Partly a matter of statutory requirements and national standards, what can be seen is also very much the result of custom and practice developed over many years. It is not surprising therefore that different agencies often approach similar administrative tasks in widely different ways. A good example is the codification of offence categories which can be seen to differ widely across the agencies involved. As this project has shown, these differences are placed in sharp focus where agencies are required to conduct computerised transactions in a way that will allow the 'seamless' exchange of information. I believe the project can teach us many valuable lessons and point to a future in which criminal justice agencies are able to work more closely together.

The increasing use of an 'open systems' approach to the information technology used by criminal justice agencies will undoubtedly facilitate easier computerised communications as systems develop. However, ensuring that the different administrative procedures are able to work more easily in harness now is a task not to be underestimated and certainly one requiring more focused consideration. My experience as chair of the Local Management Group steering the Hampshire e-mail project is that, while the challenge is clearly a formidable one, the benefits both in increased efficiency and effectiveness and a greater mutual understanding of how the different agencies operate are there for all to see.

The Pilot Phase

The Hampshire project follows on from a successful pilot involving all criminal justice agencies in Southampton undertaken during the latter part of 1995 and early 1996. A parallel pilot was also set up in Suffolk at the same time. The objective of both pilots was a relatively modest one - seeking to replace some existing paper-based transactions between the agencies with electronic exchanges using e-mail in order to demonstrate that new technology could make a significant contribution to the efficient and effective flow of information.

In many respects much of the work needed to establish the project's viability was achieved during the pilot phase. This included finding the relevant technical solutions, establishing how the project would be

managed and putting appropriate procedures in place to support its continued operation. The time and effort put in by the staff and consultants attached to the Home Office CCCJS Unit at this pilot stage combined well alongside the essential contribution made by the staff in the local agencies. That's not to say this partnership did not have its occasional disagreements along the way, suffice to say at the completion of the pilot phase we have now achieved a successful transition to the local management of the project in a way that ensures its continued success. While the criminal justice agencies in Hampshire had already started exploring the possible benefits of inter-agency co-operation in the use of technology, the decision to choose Southampton as a pilot site for the national e-mail element of the CCCJS project meant significant progress was possible in a timescale that would not otherwise have been achievable.

Organisational Structure

Under the overall management of the Home Office CCCJS Unit, the agencies involved in the initial pilot were the police, the CPS, the probation service, magistrates' courts, Crown Courts and the prison service. More recently we have seen the welcome addition of solicitors and barristers. From the outset it was important to establish well defined working groups with appropriate representation from each of the participating agencies both locally and centrally, including the Home Office. First it was essential to ensure that the computer systems were linked in a way that was reliable, secure and able to deliver measurable improvements over existing paper-based methods. The task of establishing a solid technical infrastructure as the platform from which this could be achieved was undertaken by a local Technical Group supported by Home Office consultants. Using X400 'gateway' technology a 'network' was quickly established and successfully tested.

In many ways the engine room of the project continues to be the local User Group delegated with the task of identifying suitable information flows; it is here that a shared understanding of each others' business processes is explored and analysed. To ensure that each agency exchanges information to an agreed set of procedures, so-called 'interchange' agreements have been established covering each flow. These agreements specify how the flows are to be established and maintained, down to such details as times for the transmission of information. As a result of these agreements, each signed by the relevant authorised person responsible, any difficulties related to individual flows can be quickly resolved. The potential benefits from computerisation of each flow are assessed by using the technique of 'before and after' studies. These were concerned not simply with a 'time and motion' evaluation of the flows, but of the views of those staff required to operate the new procedures. The involvement of front-line staff in the development of the flows has been crucial to the successes achieved. Where it has not proved possible to establish particular flows, their contribution has been essential to understanding why.

Benefits Arising

Turning to the benefits that have been achieved, a good example involving my own agency is the use of e-mail at the arrest stage where a person might be charged and held overnight to appear in court the next day. If the duty solicitor is unsuccessful in obtaining bail, resulting in a remand in custody to the local prison, the use of e-mail by the prison and probation services prior to a second appearance illustrates the gains possible.

First the court-based bail information officer will e-mail all the relevant information concerning the police cell interview prior to the remand in custody to the prison direct from the court building. Interviews will take place in the prison to establish whether fresh information relevant to the possible granting of bail can be identified. Using standard pro-formas this information will be simultaneously transmitted to both the court bail information officer and the CPS. Where practices are part of the project this information can also be sent direct to the relevant solicitor. In a process that is required to be completed as speedily as possible, the extra time gained can be focused on completing a thorough investigation of the defendant's situation and providing a better service to all concerned, including the courts.

A similar example can be seen in relation to the transmission of pre-sentence reports to the Crown Court. Pressures to produce reports within tight timescales have been eased, with the allied advantage of being able to put reports before judges quicker than would normally be the case. Again where agreed these reports can be made available to the defense that much sooner.

These are only two examples involving the probation service, prisons, CPS, Crown Court and solicitors and barristers and illustrate what has been achieved in a very short space of time. There are numerous other examples involving flows between the various agencies as wide ranging as charge sheets sent from police to magistrates' courts; lists of committals from magistrates' courts to Crown Courts and probation; proposed discontinuance from CPS to police; leave to appeal date from Crown Court to magistrates' court, police and participating solicitors and barristers. The list is indeed a formidable one and growing all the time, amply illustrating the confidence that all the participating agencies have in the project. Importantly the project is beginning to identify a range of flows that solicitors and barristers are able to take part in, bringing them much closer to the day-to-day administration of the criminal justice system.

The smoothing of established boundaries between all the agencies can be seen as an important by-product of the whole process. Speaking at the formal launch of the project attended by Home Office Minister David Maclean, Jane Beesley of the Hampshire Police's Administration of Justice Department observed, when talking about a number of exchanges between the police and CPS, that 'It was a revelation to me to find out that the problems we inherit from the CPS are not actually devised by them to cause additional work for the police, but are actually caused by the pressures placed on them by the criminal justice system, some of which we could go some way to help resolve.'

This simple but important observation raises an issue that I believe is central to the success of this or any other project seeking to improve the way criminal justice agencies work together. In our case it is not simply a matter of utilising new technology, or finding better, more efficient ways of exchanging information, it is essentially about understanding the culture and practices underpinning each of our organisations and finding ways to bring about change that respects the differences but builds on the similarities in a way that is positive and outward looking. In the time that I have been involved with this project, the enthusiasm with which everyone has contributed, not only to achieving more efficient and effective exchanges of essential information between the agencies but also to a much better understanding of how individual agencies operate, has left an indelible impression on me. As the project, now devolved and managed locally, looks forward to a period of consolidation to be followed by further expansion, I really do see a period of continuing success that will bring lasting benefit to all those involved. I very much look forward to the day when the benefits we are seeing in Hampshire become part of the operation of the criminal justice system nationally.

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