



# INTERACT

The INTERACT (Investigating New Types of Engagement, Response and Contact Technologies in Policing) project explored the use of new technologies in interactions between the police and public, and how police can build legitimacy with various publics amidst changes to police contact.

BRIEFING 1 - **October 2024**

## What is the strategic vision for delivering digital police contact?

### Authors:

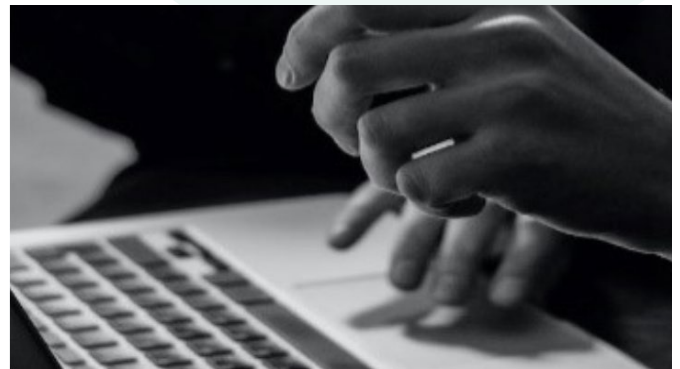
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### Exploring the views of strategic leads in national and force roles as they introduce new forms of police/public contact as part of a 'channel shift' agenda.

- In recent years, various new contact channels have been introduced which increase the options available to the public to report incidents to the police. These include online reporting, LiveChat options, and reporting via social media.
- Policing leaders hold certain assumptions about what benefits these new channels will bring, and who they will benefit, within a broader narrative around the ability of technology to help with managing demand.
- Relatively little engagement had been conducted with end users of the contact products that were being designed, and in

some cases it was the police, rather than the public, that was viewed as the end user.

- New forms of contact are making members of the public more responsible for reporting in the 'right' ways and for communicating the 'right' information about their concern to the police to access services.
- Contact should be viewed as a journey and not as a product, but the tendency to commission and deliver contact projects sometimes means that the public's end-to-end policing experience is not considered or evaluated.



## Background

In recent years, UK police forces have begun to offer an increasing range of options to the public who wish to report an incident or access information. These have included;

- online reporting via pre-designed forms available via a force website (though formats and processes differ);
- LiveChat functionality (similar to the option that sometimes appears in the corner of a shopping website inviting you to chat with someone online);
- and reporting in various ways via police force social media accounts (to date, normally X or Facebook, and generally via Direct Messaging options).

Each of these developments offers an alternative to traditional phone contact using the established emergency (999) or non-emergency (101) numbers, or indeed to an in-person encounter in the street or a police station, and means that the public is increasingly likely to interact with policing in ways that are mediated through technology.

At the national level, these initiatives appear to have been driven by assumptions that the public both want and expect public sector organisations, including policing, to have a significant online presence, with a similar level of functionality and ease of use to other services they routinely access. They are also, undoubtedly, driven by a need to manage increasing public demand for police services, and a belief that technology can assist with this. However, little research seems to have explored these assumptions about the impact and implications of technology generally, or indeed in the police context.

When people report incidents to the police, or contact them for other reasons, they may have a range of different expectations. They may want the police to solve crimes, apprehend offenders, return stolen property, restore order or, at the very least, provide a competent investigation or intervention. But they may also have expectations of the police as representatives of the state, society and a sense of order and want someone to recognise that they have suffered a wrong or reassure them that their experiences matter. Relevant to this second set of expectations is procedural justice theory, which most UK police organisations now accept as significant to their relationship with the public and, in particular, to their legitimacy and levels of public trust. In that sense, our broader research project was interested in the playing out of these various expectations, while this particular set of interviews was focused on if/how strategic leaders and decision makers understand and operationalise these underlying concerns.



## What we did

We identified and interviewed participants in strategic roles at both a national and force level who were involved in projects or workstreams focused on delivering digital contact within policing (these projects included those focused on reporting and communicating online, via LiveChat and via social media). The fieldwork took place over four sites and we conducted a total of 32 semi-structured interviews (including across 3 forces) in-person or via Teams. We also observed a series of 8 one-day workshops in one force that was embarking on its digital contact journey and had yet to design or commission its new services. Our fieldwork covered the range of new forms of contact channel that were being considered or had already been introduced. Our themes included: methodologies employed for design and delivery of new contact options; understandings of the wants and needs of both the public and the police for contact encounters; and hopes and expectations in respect of technological developments.



## Key findings

**Many assumptions are made about what the public wants and needs from its encounters with policing.** Our participants tended to believe that the public wanted, primarily, to engage in transactions with a police force, and to share or obtain information as quickly and easily as possible. This tallied with a police need to believe that the public wanted these kinds of encounters, which would allow forces to deliver technologically-mediated forms of contact with an increasing 'self-service' element to them. Furthermore, we discovered a tendency to believe that the increasing use of technology would both appeal to younger members of the public who were seen as hard to engage, and assist people with various particular access needs who were alienated by traditional contact channels. In that sense digital forms of contact were promoted as both being the solution to managing existing demand, but also as a way of increasing demand by reaching new populations.



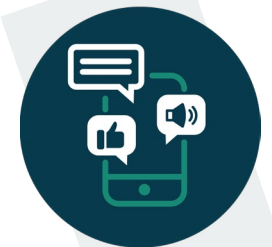
**End-user engagement had not been a top priority prior to the design of services.** With some exceptions, we found relatively little evidence of engagement with imagined end-users of contact services, and some examples of the police themselves (rather than the public) being seen as the ultimate end-user of a contact product, that had been designed and introduced by a contact project. In line with the previous key finding, this meant that technology options were often designed based on assumptions, and participants' own experiences and preferences. This had resulted in some misunderstandings about particular groups' access needs, for example what 'worked' for neurodivergent and deaf communities (see Briefings 4 and 5), and a general tendency to believe that the vast majority of people would benefit from a shift towards digital forms of contact. Exceptions who were alluded to on some occasions were the 'digitally-excluded' (who were thought to be decreasing in number), and older people (who would be replaced in due course by people with lifelong online experience).



**'Contact' is often imagined as a discrete product, rather than as a journey through the criminal justice system.** Projects commissioned to deliver new forms of contact, unsurprisingly, tended to view contact as a product (which ended once the member of the public had submitted their information or request and the 'job' had been passed on to another police business area). In that sense they were relatively self-contained in terms of how they measured their own success. For example, it was common to see user satisfaction measured at the end of a reporting encounter, rather than when the member of the public was likely to believe that the issue was actually resolved. We compared this to asking a customer to review the product they had bought online when they had finished placing an order, rather than when they had received, unboxed and used the item. In the police context, collecting data prematurely is likely to give a false measure of public satisfaction with police service delivery.



**New forms of digital contact are shifting the burden of responsibility onto the public.** The shift towards digitally-mediated forms of contact, often based on text-based data entry has altered the nature of interactions between a person making contact with the police and the police as an organisation. Methods such as online reporting rely on the member of the public re-rendering their experience into a version that fits with the structure of a form designed to meet police needs, and providing the information required to fulfil a policing purpose. What is effectively 'designed out' is information that policing had not deemed important enough to design into the form, or that the member of the public simply wants to share. We contrast this with a scenario where an officer takes a statement while a victim or witness speaks, and the officer selects which information is noted and which is not. The member of the public then has the opportunity to voice whatever they wish, whether or not that is then recorded by policing. In some cases, this change to the retelling and recording process meant that the member of the public reporting online was effectively taking some responsibility for threat, harm and risk assessments. These developments are at odds with what the literature tells us about what the public values about its encounters with policing, and also assumes that all members of the public are equally capable of describing their need in ways that trigger a policing response.





## Implications

- Further end-user engagement would help police forces to avoid making potentially incorrect assumptions about what digital contact can deliver for policing and public alike.
- The design of new forms of contact should take into account a diverse range of police and public needs, and avoid seeing encounters as purely transactional. Research suggests that users have other, more relational, needs beyond simple and efficient reporting processes.
- Similarities between policing and other encounters (such as online shopping) should not be overstated, again based on research evidence about the very specific context that is policing.
- Any new system that shifts the burden of responsibility for accurately capturing a policing need onto the person reporting it should be viewed with caution and stress-tested on various publics with different needs and abilities.
- Contact between a member of the public and the police should be viewed as a journey and not as a product, but the tendency to commission (and then deliver and measure) 'contact projects' sometimes means that the public's end-to-end policing experience is not considered or evaluated.
- If policing only measures satisfaction with making initial contact, it is likely to misunderstand public satisfaction with policing. Indeed, there are arguments for the journey extending much further into the criminal justice system to where the member of the public's issue is ultimately resolved.



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