

Prison Sector Innovation & Efficiency



c-hq security services are an independent UK security technology and resilience consultancy practice with a specialism in custodial provision. Company directors Gareth Storey, Kevin Brownell and Martin Grigg consider further the challenges facing stakeholders in the custodial sector and the solutions available to them.

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EFFICIENCY THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

There is push to higher levels of cost effectiveness in the spend on prison systems. This is not just in terms of capital spend but overall running efficiency of the Establishment with a reduction in the number of system operators a clear requirement. System designs have to be dove tailed into the prison management procedures and a fully consultative approach is required to ensure that the design supports a lean operation.

Prison Officers are responsible for ensuring and maintaining security. Concerns have been raised about the relative lack of training and experience of prison officers working in the private sector, compared to officers employed by the Prison Service. Some have said that prison officers in the private sector lack sufficient training and experience and argue that this is a risk to prisoner safety. There are concerns within the prison system as a whole that there are too few prison officers to ensure the safety of prisoners and the security of institutions. Increasingly, prisons have sought to cut costs by replacing staff with electronic monitoring. ^[1]

The number of offenders in prison in the UK reached a record high of 87,749 prisoners on 5th November 2011. The prison population in England and Wales has increased steadily over the past century and surpassed 80,000 for the first time in December 2006. On 22nd February 2008 the total population exceeded the useable operational capacity of the prison estate for the first time in history. ^[2]

This level of prison occupation can only be managed through the innovative use of technology combined with training strategies that ensures that each Prison Officer takes full advantage of the tools and processes available. On-going review and training is essential to maintain security, efficiency and cost effectiveness of the Establishment.

GIANT MACHINES MOVE SLOWLY

c-hq have experienced a slow rate of adoption of new technologies from risk averse customer bases such as the Public Sector Prison Service. Some public sector workers that have the responsibility for decision making will opt for “what has been tried and tested” rather than embrace new technology to introduce efficiencies. However, the increasing involvement of the private sector is injecting fresh and innovative thinking that the prison authorities do need to update standards to reflect current practices in the electronic security field.



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LEADING RATHER THAN BLEEDING EDGE

A word of caution to the decision makers is that we remain constantly surprised by the amount of product that is released with insufficient testing. Often equipment does not do what it says on the box. It is very difficult to establish what is “good to go” and what is “bleeding edge”. Greater investment in beta testing must be made and manufacturers must avoid the temptation to just get the product out there. c-hq provide a due diligence service to minimise these risks but even so we recommend caution when adopting new technology that is making great claims.

WE HAVE STANDARDS

The Ministry of Justice maintain a vast library of standards to be applied to security systems and technology deployed in our prisons but there is a poor discipline in standard enforcement.

In the current economic climate, cost is taking a dominant role in procurement decisions. Often installers win work by installing equipment that does not meet the standards and unless there is a consultant with specialist knowledge overseeing the project these non-compliances are unwittingly accepted. This ultimately results in loss of standards control and systems having to be replaced prematurely when the non-compliance is noted and becomes an issue. Although we have already alluded to the fact that the standards need updating, we strongly believe that the standards are critical to ensuring consistent quality in security installations. Although alternative technology may well produce similar results to the ones specified, the standards have been produced with the knowledge of years of experience and expertise. We usually find that there is a rational explanation for what may initially seem to be an irrational standard.

MEETING THE STANDARDS DRIVES UP COST

There is a limited pool of specialist manufacturers that manufacture to the Ministry Standards. The unique environment has driven a small number of specialist manufacturers to develop tailor made solutions for the custodial sector. This does lead to limited number of providers from which to select solutions. The investment of the major manufacturers in small adaptations to existing products to suit this sector would provide greater choice to the designer and enhance cost efficiency for the customer.

INNOVATION WITHOUT RISK

c-hq believe that with a focused concentration on the technology standards that already exist within the Ministry of Justice, it is possible to drive down costs and improve efficiency across both the public and private sector prisons.

Gareth, Kevin and Martin are directors of Sussex-based c-hq security services. They have wealth of combined experience in the security industry and their backgrounds cover many aspects of electrical engineering. c-hq security services are an independent specialist security technology and resilience consultancy practice with a demonstrable track record in successful prison and custodial applications. The practice’s other core competence areas include Ministry of Defence, critical national infrastructure (CNI) and corporate facilities.

^[1] Politics.co.uk - Prison Officers Article sourced December 2011

^[2] House of Commons Library -Prison Population Statistics Standard Note SN/SG/4334

