



Digital Ethics in Policing

Market Report

The world is how we shape it

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Foreword

Insight and knowledge generated from data is policing's lifeblood. It is the critical enabler in protecting society's most vulnerable. Within the context of new digital solutions, powerful analytics and ever-increasing sources of data available to the police, there is immense opportunity, but also risk.

There is the opportunity to build powerful solutions that offer revolutionary insights fit for a police service that is the envy of the western world.

At the same time, there are increased risks of cybercrime, information mismanagement, error, and bias. Getting these wrong could have lasting damage on the public-police relationship.



However, it is important not to forget the often-unseen risk of doing nothing. Our adversaries, such as serious and organised crime actors, already have access to very capable data and analytics capability themselves, enabled by the commoditisation of cloud services. Police forces must act to ensure they remain a step ahead.

Society's trust in policing has been tested in recent years, with high profile news stories challenging policing decisions and attitudes. Bridging the digital transformation gap is essential if policing is to keep pace with the evolving justice landscape, but running before it can walk is equally dangerous. Forces are faced with the challenge of marching forward with new technologies that could enrich their decision-making toolkit beyond measure, without feeling fully confident about the ethical implications of doing so.

"We must move now and move quickly."

National Policing Digital Strategy 2020-2030

Technologists like Sopra Steria have been working in partnership with police forces for decades to ensure that digital solutions are tailored to their complex needs. Just as the police turn to subject matter experts in building technology solutions, so too should they feel that they can seek their advice on the ethics of technology.

Paul Bergin

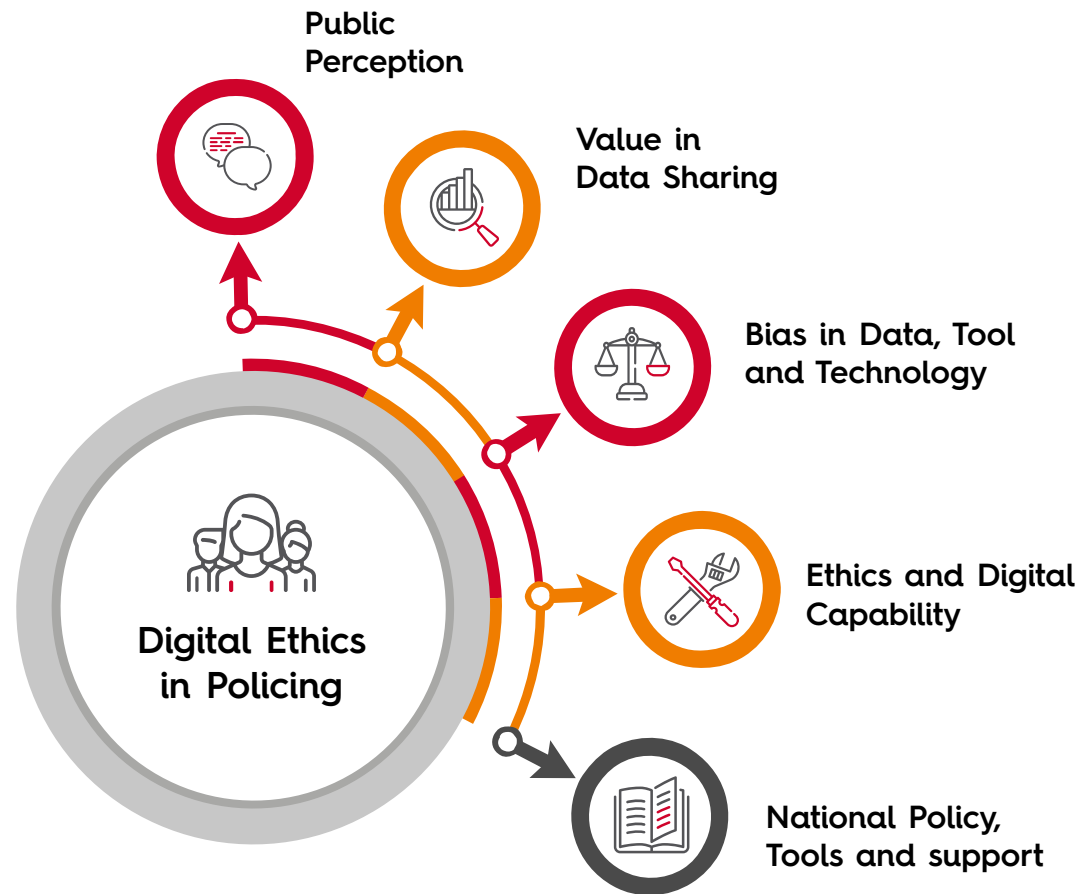
Head of Public Safety, Sopra Steria



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It is our role to help forces embrace digital transformation with confidence, bolstered by approaches that lock in ethics by design. Our highly-acclaimed Digital Ethics Practice has been working to gain an in-depth understanding of the digital ethics landscape in policing today to do just that. In this report, we set out the findings. I hope you will find reading this report as worthwhile as I did. Whether you're a policing professional interested in tailored digital ethics support for your force or simply someone who would like to learn more, please don't hesitate to reach out to me or our Digital Ethics Practice of that research as grouped into five key themes:



Digital Ethics

What is Digital Ethics?

Over the last decade, there has been a growing recognition that technology, and the trend towards more sophisticated uses of data, have potential consequences for society, individuals and the environment. Questions about the privacy concerns arising from smart home cameras, concerns over the effects of social media on young people, and so-called mutant algorithms being used in the public education system have been increasing.

These headlines, and many more like them, have started to shake what used to be a relatively firm foundation of trust in technology. And with trust in public institutions already on the decline according to reports like the Edelman Trust Barometer¹, this is worrying for organisations that need to use data and technology to provide effective public services.

Sopra Steria has been working with organisations to take these complex and daunting issues out of the abstract and to try to make them approachable and manageable by providing a structured approach to digital ethics.

To that end, we use this definition of digital ethics:

Digital ethics is a continual process of identifying, prioritising and managing the risks and opportunities that technology and data use pose to humans, society and the environment.



Digital ethics is active, not a passive set of principles or codes of conduct. It requires policy and governance, but it also requires tools, skills and culture adaptation. To make digital ethics accessible and manageable, and to start that continual process of identification, prioritisation and management, we use our Digital Ethics Categories as lenses that organisations can use to identify ethical risks and opportunities within their own unique strategic and cultural context. These categories have been defined by drawing on the myriad of standards and guidelines published across the world with regards to technology ethics in the last decade.



Privacy

Digital services are typically fed and improved by access to data which may be personal to an individual. However, the costs of mishandling personal information can be considerable – Alphabet, the parent company of Google, was fined €50m for “lack of transparency, inadequate information and lack of valid consent regarding ads personalisation”². Society values privacy, so we must achieve a balance between utility and individual privacy.



Displacement, Skills and Work

Technology has the potential to create new and interesting careers, and to enable people to live more fulfilling lives. However, digital technology has been changing how we work, the types of jobs available, and how work is valued and remunerated for decades. The transition to the new world of work is accelerating as companies undergo digital transformation, and this is raising fear. This category asks what the impact of digital technology will be on an organisation’s own workforce and the wider world of work.



Safety

Digital technology comes with new and sometimes increased threats to people, businesses and national security. Our attention to safety is heightened as technology typically reduces human touch points, where risks can be spotted and mitigated quickly.



Transparency

Digital solutions offer the potential to provide services more quickly and effectively than ever before, and to a greater number of people. However, reducing or removing human-to-human interaction may make it more difficult for users to understand what they are agreeing to and how decisions are made. Organisations will have to address this as users demand more transparency, and lawmakers slowly catch up. Moreover, digital services often mask the ethical responsibility for a given act, and create networks of “distributed responsibility”³. To ensure transparency over decision-making and the reversibility of outcomes that impact humans, organisations will have to address the assignment of responsibility for their digital technology.



Fairness, Equality, Diversity and Accessibility

Digital technologies can be used to create a more diverse and inclusive world. By connecting more people together than ever before using digital technologies, we can expand the access to services across the globe and improve empathy through shared experiences. To ensure this greater inclusion and accessibility, however, we must not reinforce and amplify human bias in a digital platform, or introducing new types of bias unique to the technology (for example, datasets that use unreliable, biased data, or facial recognition technology that doesn't recognise certain groups of people). Special care and attention must be taken towards vulnerable persons and those that may be left behind by technology, and we must work to break down barriers rather than introduce new ones. Furthermore, mitigating technology's ability to exclude is not enough - organisations must act to empower marginalised groups.



Environmental Sustainability

Digital technology has the potential to help solve some of the world's biggest challenges, such as climate change, air and water pollution, and resource shortages. But it can have environmental costs too, in the forms of resource consumption and depletion, earth and water pollution, and its own energy and carbon footprint.



Societal Impact

Public sentiment has shifted greatly towards ethical business practices, and there is increasing scrutiny on technology businesses from regulators, the public, consumers and employees to act on social issues. With the power that technology brings, it is imperative that an organisation acts to ensure not only its own profitability, but that it builds a better society, working towards the common good. We are already seeing organisations holding back technology which could be used for dangerous means, highlighting the complexity of ensuring a positive societal impact⁴.



Digital Ethics and Policing

Making better use of data is essential to driving better policing outcomes, as is a large-scale modernisation of technology, making more use of the technologies that are ubiquitous in civilian life – such as smart phones and cloud-based data centres, and the use of digital channels that enable citizens to contact police more easily.

As with all other sectors, technology is rapidly changing how policing works, while citizens' expectations around accessing public services digitally have also changed. The National Policing Digital Strategy 2020-2030 states, "The challenges and opportunities that digital disruption present to policing are rapidly becoming defining issues for the service."

However, as in other sectors, the ethical risks associated with these rapid digital transformations are multiplying. Furthermore, the digital ethical consequences are arguably greater in the policing sector than in many other sectors, with data and technology being used to make potentially life-altering decisions about citizens.

Examples of data and technology use in policing that have high ethical risk and which have become high profile include:

- Predictive policing, which has been seen as making policing more effective in some instances, but which can also raise questions about how crimes are reported and recorded, and how community policing decisions are made based on potentially biased and inaccurate data and algorithms.

- Facial recognition technologies, which could help to solve crimes more quickly, but which also have well-documented challenges with accuracy and bias, while also raising questions of privacy, safety and wider social impact.
- Body-worn cameras, which may make policing more transparent, but also raise questions about fairness, accuracy, and privacy.

Academics, government groups, industry bodies and police forces have been working to integrate ethical standards into the police use of data and technology. Examples include the Ethics Advisory Report from the Alan Turing Institute for West Midlands Police, which outlined ethical approaches and analytical techniques in pursuit of law-enforcement objectives⁵. The Scottish Government have set up an independent advisory group on emerging technologies in policing that will ensure Police Scotland's use of emerging technologies for operational policing is compatible with human rights and other applicable legislation and best practice⁶. The Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation produced the RUSI report, which reviewed the use of algorithms in human decisionmaking, with particular focus on bias⁷. The National Police Chiefs Council's Ethics Committee has established a Digital and Data Ethics Guidance Group that will explore policing technology ethics issues at a national level. Suppliers of technology to police forces, such as Sopra Steria and Axon⁸, have also started to integrate ethics into their work, and techUK, the technology industry group in the UK, brings together police representatives, government, academic groups, and the technology industry to focus on digital ethics in events such as at this year's techUK Police Digital ICT Summit⁹.

About the Research

In 2021, Sopra Steria undertook research in three phases: a review of existing research, followed by workshops with former police officers and police industry experts, and then interviews with current and former members of the policing community. Five key themes describing the main needs, concerns and challenges common across UK policing emerged from the first two phases, and formed the basis for our interviews in the third phase. Through the third phase interviews, we examined these themes, evaluating how police forces are experiencing them, and capturing insights into how individual forces are dealing with them.



The five themes are:

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Public perception

Police forces face much public scrutiny, and a negative public perception of the force can heavily impact trust and confidence.



Value in data sharing

There is a general lack of data sharing within and between forces, as well as with external organisations, and there is little protocol and guidance to allow for easier and ethical methods of data sharing.



Bias in data, tools and technology

Unintended bias in technology used by the police can have negative impacts even when used with the right intention and in the right circumstances.



Ethical and digital capability

Forces lack the digital and ethical expertise to fully comprehend potential digital ethics issues.



National policy, tools and support

There is no consistent way of embedding ethical approaches across UK policing, and there is little to no benchmarking done. We will explore these themes and how they were evidenced by the findings from the research in more detail in the sections that follow.

Public Perception

A wealth of research has been conducted about public trust and police, for example from institutions such as the Justice Inspectorate¹⁰ and London School of Economics¹¹. In our research we found that public trust in police forces is heavily influenced by the perception the public have of the police's use of technology, as evidenced in particular by media articles and reports. Common misconceptions include a belief that the police have access to advanced technology resources, and that reduced officer presence on the street means fundamental policing work is not being done¹². The other four themes all play a part in influencing public trust and perception, as the way forces approach these challenges will have an impact on their local communities.

One of the most consistent points raised – by seven out of the sixteen interview participants – was that there is a large gap between what the public think the police are capable of doing with technology, and how police actually use technology. This gap between perception and reality is one of the underlying causes of public fear and mistrust of the police. For example, many forces pointed to a public belief that the use of facial recognition technology is far more commonplace than it truly is. One force said:

“We as a force here have purposefully chosen not to go down the route of using facial recognition in terms of scanning crowds for wanted people etc... [we are] aware of the contention that sits around that in terms of accuracy of that capability, the degree to which it's discriminatory.”

There is also increasing opportunity to allow easier and more open communication with the public. Technology enables citizens to contact the police through more communication channels – police organisations who have not yet modernised may not be as accessible to their community as they could be. This was raised by participants as an area of great opportunity for forces, with one force telling us about the potential virtual communications they are now exploring: “We'll always have the traditional telephone, but we want to move to [more of a] chat function from our online platforms. [The] chat bots we're exploring now – we should be able to automate when we know the types of queries that members of the public ring about.”

If forces are able to embrace the possibilities that technology can bring in communicating openly and transparently with the public, it could enable them to be more inclusive and to build better relationships that generate higher levels of trust within their local communities.



Value in Data Sharing

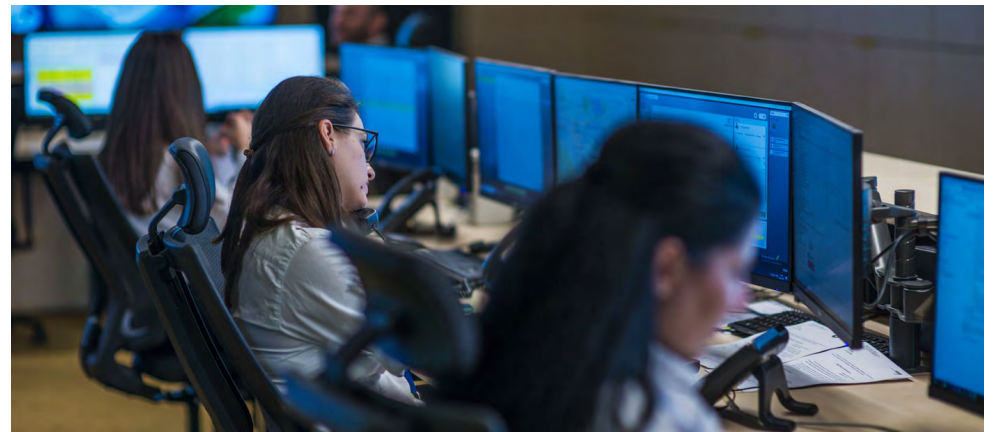
Sharing data across agencies (e.g. between local authorities, health officials, police and other legitimate public organisations) could dramatically improve public services, including policing¹³. From the earliest phases of our research, effective and efficient data sharing was raised as a serious challenge. Forces, like organisations in most other sectors, are understandably concerned about complying with legislation, and about privacy and security. There are examples of good data sharing practices starting to emerge, such as for domestic abuse safeguarding, which requires external agencies to go through a vetting process in order to sign up to an information sharing protocol¹⁴. However, most forces do not have consistent good practices such as these in place.

Agencies, as well as the forces themselves, can use a variety of different data systems, and while it is possible for these systems to interact, having multiple entry points leaves more possibility for error and the quality of data is impacted. The vast amount of information, stored across such a variety of systems means that data could be missed, or not all is allowed to be shared. This means it is often difficult for all parties to get a full picture of an incident. All six of the forces we spoke to are now making a move to consolidate their systems, and some forces are now looking into giving external agencies access to their system in order to address this challenge.

“There’s been quite a discussion about whether we should just give direct access to NICE [our data system]... there are some benefits to doing so, not least with our trusted partners who carry very sensitive data themselves, for instance children’s services and the county council.”

While forces recognise the potential value in sharing data, many described an approach to data that is more rooted in risk mitigation than value creation. For example, some forces told us that data processes are only reviewed when something goes wrong. This was raised as a concern in at least two of the interviews, with one participant telling us, “Most of the messaging feels like it tends to be [sent] out more when there’s some sort of breach, so an example being if someone has wrongly accessed police systems and are therefore disciplined or lose their job.”

Another data issue forces face is the risk of being overwhelmed by the volume and variety of data now coming in, a challenge identified by five of the sixteen participants. They need to be able to quickly establish what is important and what needs to, and can, be shared with others, especially in time-critical situations. Forces need ways to manage and prioritise the ever-increasing amounts of data. If we can find a safe, transparent and privacy-protected way to open this data up, it could have huge benefits for society.



Bias in Data, Tools and Technologies

The challenge of bias in policing data, tools and technologies has been well documented¹⁵, and has more recently entered the public consciousness, for example with more debate happening around body-worn cameras¹⁶ and facial recognition technologies. Participants in our research showed high awareness of these issues, but generally felt the question was not about avoiding use of certain technologies, but better choosing when to use them. This is despite the high-profile vendor exits from the likes of IBM, Microsoft and Amazon in 2020 from the facial recognition technology market for policing¹⁷.

This attitude also does not address the challenges of bias in areas such as policing algorithms. Some participants did begin to identify some of these challenges, with one saying, “If we had algorithms that said ‘Joe Bloggs, he has come from this underprivileged background, he lives in this area, he’s been excluded from school, he has been involved in non-crime anti-social behaviour previously therefore he’s going to be on our systems as a potential criminal’ - if that was then disclosed to [authorities] and potentially impact someone’s life I think that’s ethically wrong. Whereas directing police resources to a general area... I’d say that’s very different because it’s not targeted at any one individual”. However, this consideration still fails to recognise the potential for bias towards groups or areas in the community and the impact this may have on the relationship between the force and their citizens, particularly for those groups which have historically felt targeted and over-policed.

Other technologies appear to be receiving more focus. For example, most forces we spoke to mentioned their use of body-worn cameras, which can result in bias or perceptions of bias depending on, for example, decisions made around the camera’s point of view and

the choice of when to turn the camera on and off. Three forces in particular spoke about having taken their body-worn video footage to independent advisory groups to be assessed by members of the public. These forces are particularly focused on getting feedback on how the officers deal with situations, and on working with citizens to improve satisfaction in the force’s conduct. One participant said, “Body cams are really key for investigations, and they’ve reduced complaints massively.” It is important that feedback from these advisory groups is taken on board within forces and implemented into ways of working.

Overall, our research shows an inconsistent approach to examining potential bias in policing tools and technologies, with specific technologies getting a lot of focus and others less. Furthermore, there appears to be inconsistency in how ethical considerations of bias in technology and tools are managed, and how decisions are implemented and communicated – something we will discuss in more detail in the next sections.



Ethical and Digital Capability

One of the biggest challenges identified in our research is the lack of digital ethics knowledge, expertise, and governance within forces.

Of the six forces we interviewed, five have ethics committees. However, very few forces have digital or data-specific ethics committees or expertise, relying on general ethics panels to have enough technical expertise to recognise potential digital ethics issues. Only one force in the country, West Midlands, has a specific data ethics committee.

While these committees may play a part in upholding ethical governance, such as Codes of Ethics (see next section), they do not hold any formal position of governance and act purely in an advisory capacity. This advice may not be deemed necessary by all forces, with one force telling us, “Some might say if you need an ethics committee, there’s something wrong, it shouldn’t be negotiable - if we’re true to our values as an organisation we should be an ethical organisation and I shouldn’t need a committee to tell me if I’m being ethical or not.” However, particularly as technology and ethical issues only grow more complex, it has been shown that digital ethics committees (or similar governance mechanisms) are essential to working on digital ethics matters¹⁸. Despite this, they are not in themselves sufficient for managing digital ethics issues, and our research showed that digital ethics has not yet been consistently embedded into operations in forces.

There was a significant difference in opinion amongst participants when we discussed how information about the work of ethics committees and on ethical issues in general should be shared within forces. Four participants felt that more transparency would help frontline officers apply more ethical approaches in their work; however, two disagreed

and felt it would be detrimental as it would be too much of an information overload. We also found that three participants had no knowledge at all about whether their force had an ethics committee.

Digital ethics capability also does not appear to be operationalised in parts of police forces in which it could play a pivotal role. For example, those with procurement and commissioning responsibilities are not equipped to evaluate potential ethical risks of technologies, or to interrogate information from technology suppliers. For example, one participant said, “[We] talked to people involved in deployment of facial recognition technology, and in all cases operational decision makers were being told it’s okay, we’ve got it on advice from the technology provider that their tech isn’t biased. When you’re in that position as an operational officer you’ve got no basis on which to say, how do I know if it’s biased or not?”



Forces also face the broader challenge of keeping pace with the rate of change of technology. Nine of sixteen participants spanning all levels of seniority identified that this is a key issue. Forces reported that many have only rolled out laptops and smartphones in the last few years, despite these being technologies most people use in their day-to-day lives. One participant said, "Even these new smartphones that we've introduced, they're already years old, and we've got children now leaving school who've learnt coding for years who will be better than our people in our organisation naturally in computer literacy... we only got laptops a few years ago; I had my first laptop 15 years ago."

The impact of this challenge to keep pace is twofold: forces that cannot adopt new technologies will miss opportunities to better serve the public and improve ethical concerns such as accessibility to services, as discussed above; it also means that forces will struggle to keep abreast of digital ethics concerns, which can vary from technology to technology.



National Policy, Tools and Support

The policing Code of Ethics and its use in the National Decision Making Model provide the main guidance for forces' management of ethics. However, these do not explicitly provide guidance for forces on digital or data ethics issues. Forces participating in our research pointed to the need for more specific digital ethics guidance at a national level, with one participant saying, "The Code of Ethics has become a bit blurry, and is also a bit of a distraction because people are focused on that and not the digital or data element (of ethical consideration)."

"HMIC itself has got capability gaps in terms of its ability to assess what good looks like in this space - [it] doesn't necessarily have the expertise in house, or hasn't seen it as enough of a priority."

Furthermore, there is currently no national approach to digital ethics benchmarking, auditing or reporting. HMIC, the main policing auditing body, does not currently review forces' approach to managing digital ethics issues. While they do review forces' legitimacy and efficiency, which can include their approach to ethics, there is more focus on compliance and broader themes such as recording crime data. HMIC have undertaken specific subject inspections, but this has yet to include any form of digital ethics assessment. Participants reiterated the importance of national policy and guidance from the Home Office and Police Crime Commissioners, suggesting that a firmer push from these governance organisations may encourage forces' investment into their own digital ethics strategies.



Conclusion

After some years of inaction, there is now a healthy and increasingly inclusive conversation happening around digital ethics in policing, with some good work emerging from industry, academia and police organisations themselves. However, as our research shows, there is still great inconsistency between forces, and gaps in individual force's approaches. Clearer national policy, guidelines and sharing of best practice will help address the inconsistency, and give forces some assurance in what action they should take. But operationalisation of digital ethics – consistently applied approaches embedded in key functions within policing organisations – will take more than top-down guidance. Forces will need to identify where their biggest risks and gaps are, prioritise action accordingly, and begin the process of updating organisational knowledge, policy, ways of working and governance accordingly. Responses also need to reflect force-specific relationships with their communities.

The digital modernisation that many forces are starting to embark on presents an opportunity to consider digital ethics more comprehensively. While Sopra Steria recommends a thorough examination of digital ethics risk in order to determine a more effective and cost-efficient digital ethics approach, forces need not wait for wholesale transformation to take action. Updates to data programmes or control rooms, or the introduction of any technology with which the public will interact present opportunities to start the process of embedding ethics.

What do you think? Share your thoughts with us

We want to continue the conversation and hear your thoughts on this emerging area of research. Do [get in touch with our Digital Ethics Practice](#) if you're interested in learning more or sharing your opinion with us.

Contributors and References

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About Sopra Steria

A new vision for public safety

Sopra Steria's Public Safety Group is celebrating 25 years of STORM, UK policing's leading command and control solution. First installed at Grampian Police in 1996, the solution now has over 65% of the market share.

25 years at the heart of the control room



We believe that this incumbency comes with a responsibility to those our policing customers protect, often society's most vulnerable.

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How do we want to shape the next 25 years at the heart of the control room? By maintaining an unwavering focus on the citizen.

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In October 2021, Sopra Steria announced a new, high-profile partnership with Salesforce. The two organisations collaborated to build a proof of concept demonstration at BAPCO 2021 and working together to build exciting new propositions to support public-safety customers. To find out more, [read the full press release](#) and [coverage in the Policing Insight publication](#).

Our Digital Ethics Practice

Our Digital Ethics Practice is making an impact across the UK's public and private sectors - visit the team's dedicated web page to view their latest activities.

About Sopra Steria

Sopra Steria, a European Tech leader recognised for its consulting, digital services and software development, helps its clients drive their digital transformation to obtain tangible and sustainable benefits. It provides end-to-end solutions to make large companies and organisations more competitive by combining in-depth knowledge of a wide range of business sectors and innovative technologies with a fully collaborative approach. Sopra Steria places people at the heart of everything it does and is committed to making the most of digital technology to build a positive future for its clients. With 47,000 employees in nearly 30 countries, the Group generated revenue of €4.7 billion in 2021.

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