

WIGAN COUNCIL USES CCTV AS TOOL IN FIGHT AGAINST CRIME

Wigan Council has had 33 Pelco Esprit cameras, supplied by Norbain SD, added to their already extensive CCTV system to ensure that they are using the most up to date technology to monitor activity in the city centre. The new cameras have proved very simple to operate and form an important tool in the fight against crime.

Wigan is currently undergoing a multi-million pound refurbishment, including regeneration of the town centre, apartment conversions and a new shopping centre. An essential part of this new scheme is ensuring that people feel safe in the area and one part of the solution comes in the form of CCTV. There are currently 550 cameras in operation across the borough, with continual additions and improvements being made.

In the town centre itself, Terry Bolton, Principle Officer for Wigan Council, wanted to update the existing kit which was rather complex to operate and had become expensive to maintain. "We worked out that it was basically costing us the same amount to maintain some of the cameras as it would be to buy new ones," he explains. "We were especially keen to make zooming and focusing easier so that operators could more effectively track suspects."

Installers Unique Integrated Systems Ltd (UIS) were called in to advise on the project. "UIS have been the Council Approved Supplier for almost seven years now and the relationship we've built up over the years means that we know they'll give us excellent advice and service," says Mr Bolton.

Trial and error

The Council has a policy of trialling their CCTV equipment before it's purchased. "This gives our staff a chance to test different pieces of equipment to see which is easier to use, gives better picture quality and so on," says Mr Bolton. Dome cameras were initially trialled for the job, but it was found that blind spots prevented them from getting the best view of the surrounding area. Additionally, the pictures were getting obscured by rain and dirt on the domes. "The Esprit cameras offer us an overt solution to CCTV," says Mr Bolton. "People don't know where the dome cameras are looking, but this is obvious with the Esprit cameras and we've found this to be more of a deterrent."

The control room has an impressive wall of rear screen projection units along with individual Samsung and Bosch flat screen monitors. "As with the cameras, we trialled a number of flat screen units before making a decision," explains Mr Bolton. "Interestingly, the morning shift favoured the Samsung screens, while the later shift thought the Bosch screens gave a better

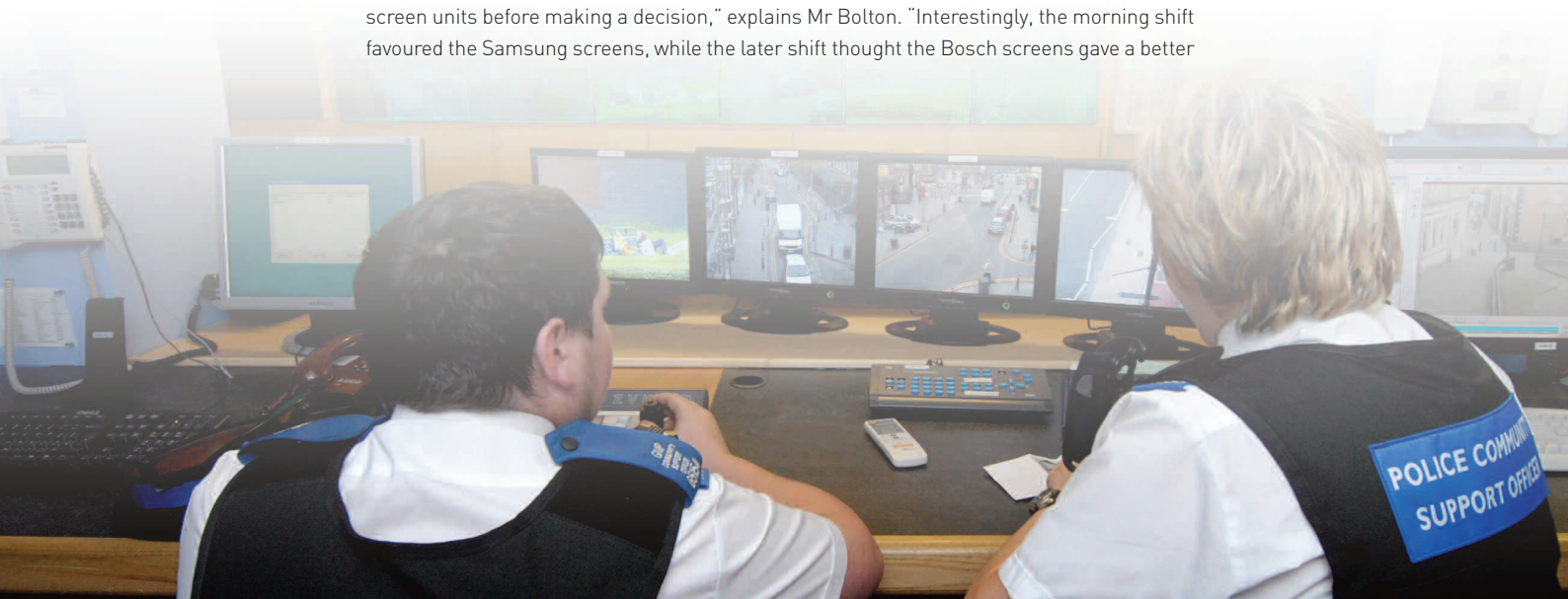


image quality in reduced light conditions. It made sense to get both so that the best pictures could be viewed whatever the time of day or night.”

Installing CCTV in town centres is never an easy procedure simply because of the amount of traffic in the area. Although some of Wigan town centre is pedestrians, other parts see an almost constant flow of heavy traffic. Because of this, UIS were often on site at 5am on a Sunday morning. “It’s impossible to use the cherry picker to install the cameras at normal times of day, so this was the only option left open to us,” explains Mark Ashall, Operations Director for UIS.

The Pelco cameras have all been positioned on poles that afford operators a 360 degree view of the area. Generally there are four static cameras and one pan/tilt/zoom, although poles in certain key areas have an additional camera to ensure the best view of the area. Additionally, each of the columns is within view of another, giving overlapping footage. This has two advantages. Firstly, it means that no key area is overlooked and secondly it means that, should a column develop a problem, one of the adjoining columns can cover the area.

Because of the way they have been positioned, the cameras form part of the jigsaw puzzle for investigating officers,” says Mr Bolton. “They can be very effectively used to track people around the town, either live from the control room, or retrospectively from recorded footage.”

Equipment suppliers Norbain played an important part in the project. “We’ve got an excellent relationship with them,” says Mr Ashall. “They’ve really bent over backwards for us over the years and have always come through, even against very tight time scales. It’s not just about price with them, it’s the service, technical support and returns policy that really makes the difference.”

Sharing information

Wigan Council works closely with the police, both in determining the best locations for the cameras and in sharing the resulting footage. A process has been set up to allow the police access to both live and recorded images to help with their investigations. There are also links with over 100 local Pub Watch and Shop Watch schemes who share information on known offenders and problem areas. The fire service also has an agreement with the council – before they even reach the scene of an incident, they can ask the CCTV operators to let them know as much as possible about the scene. Procedures can then be followed to allow footage to be burnt onto disk should it be required.

Mr Bolton moved to the council with eleven years experience with the police. Although not initially an expert in the area, he quickly migrated toward CCTV which he has now been involved with for the past seven years. “Things were very different back then,” he remembers. “CCTV wasn’t manned and were using tapes that had to be changed every 12 hours.” Things have certainly progressed since then, with Mr Bolton playing an instrumental role in the



changes. Interestingly enough, the initial pilot scheme for a manned control room wasn't a great success. "The police needed educating on the advantages of full-time monitoring, but once they'd realised the benefits we saw a tremendous growth in a very short amount of time," says Mr Bolton.

It's not just Wigan Town Centre that is controlled from here, a further six town centres in the borough, each with their own more basic control room, are also linked back. "If the main control room should ever go down, we could control all the equipment from one of the other control rooms in the borough which gives us great flexibility," says Mr Bolton.

Looking at the effectiveness of CCTV in the fight against crime, Mr Bolton believes that it certainly plays its part. "CCTV acts both as a deterrent and as an investigative tool for our partners," he says. "All the relevant partners need to work together and communicate regularly to most effectively tackle the problem." One change that has been brought about with the use of CCTV cameras is the process of reporting crime. "Operators can see what's happening and footage can be viewed in retrospect. This means that crimes that may have previously gone unreported are now being reported and, ultimately, detected."

About Unique Integrated Systems Ltd

UIS specialises in the design, installation and maintenance of high quality electronic security systems. From intruder alarms, CCTV systems and access control systems to fully integrated security and communications packages, they design and install proven systems that offer the utmost quality, reliability and value.

An NSI gold medal installer, they can handle projects of all sizes, from a simple installation to long term, multi-site maintenance contracts.

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