

West Midlands Police: Digital Evidence Transformation Journey

Abstract

This report examines the current position of digital evidence management within WMP, analysing the technological infrastructure, processes, training protocols, challenges and future opportunities.

It identifies strengths and areas for improvement in WMP's digital evidence handling capabilities. Key recommendations focus on enhancing agile working methods, streamlining investigation workflows, updating policies, implementing technical improvements, expanding training programs, and an opportunity with the establishment of local digital hubs to better support investigations. The findings highlight the critical importance of effective digital evidence management in modern policing and provide a roadmap for WMP to strengthen its capabilities in this rapidly evolving landscape.

Background on Digital Evidence in West Midlands Police

WMP has increasingly integrated digital evidence into its investigative processes over the past decade. As criminal activity has evolved to incorporate technology, so too has the need for the force to develop robust capabilities for collecting, analysing, and managing digital evidence. From 999 calls, Body Worn Video (BWV), CCTV, Audio files, Forensic photography and data extracted from mobile devices, digital evidence now forms a foundation and fundamental part of investigations.

For WMP, effective management of digital evidence directly impacts:

- Resource allocation and operational costs
- Investigation efficiency and effectiveness
- Case outcome success rates
- Public confidence and satisfaction in police capability
- Compliance with evolving legal and procedural requirements

As digital evidence continues to grow in volume and complexity, the ability to handle it effectively becomes increasingly central to overall performance, public service delivery and satisfaction.

Types of Digital Evidence

WMP encounters and processes a diverse range of digital evidence types, each requiring specific handling protocols and technical expertise:

Body Worn Video: An everyday tool for recording police activity to build trust and confidence in communities by providing a true and unbiased account which allows scrutiny and accountability.

Mobile Phones: Representing one of the most common and data rich sources of evidence, mobile phones contain communications records, location data, photographs, and application usage information. The Digital Forensics Unit provides the extraction and investigators analyse data using software.

Computers: Devices often contain substantial volumes of evidence including documents, browsing history, and communication records.

Cloud Based Evidence: Increasingly, evidence resides in cloud storage platforms rather than on physical devices. This presents challenges related to access, authorisation, and jurisdiction. It is commonly encountered in CCTV Ring door bells.

CCTV Footage: Video evidence from both public and private CCTV systems forms a critical component of many investigations. The force handles significant volumes of CCTV footage, requiring capabilities for collection, conversion, analysis, and storage. Standardised Operating Procedures provide guidance to ensure integrity.

Photographs: Forensic Scene imagery is stored and shared allowing for the removal of multiple discs per crime scene and assurance of data security and integrity.

Digital Evidence Store

Axon - Evidence.com is used as a platform to collect, store, manage and share digital evidence. It has significantly improved the ability to manage the volume of digital evidence, though challenges persist in the automation, organisation and searchability.

The platform provides:

CCTV Registry: The public and businesses have registered the existence of their CCTV and doorbell cameras to help the police by a request being sent to them when alerted of a crime. It works by the location of the camera being registered which takes 60 seconds. The owner of the CCTV receives a text message or email when a crime happens nearby and it is believed they may have recorded the incident. The owner uploads the images via a secure link sent through Axon. Saving inconvenience to the owner, officer time and providing a digital solution.

Community Request Portal: Enabling members of the public to submit digital evidence directly to investigators through a secure online portal, streamlining the collection process and reducing administrative burden.

Redaction Capabilities: Tools to efficiently redact sensitive information from digital evidence before sharing and use in court

File Management: Storage, organisation and secure sharing of digital evidence with expert witnesses and the Crown Prosecution Service.

Evaluation of Effectiveness

A simple analysis of the end-to-end digital evidence process within WMP reveals several insights in relation to CCTV:

1. Initial Collection: Generally effective procedures but requires further digitalisation to remove the need for discs and improved training to ensure all staff have the technical ability consummate with their role. The CCTV registry continues to require significant roll out

2. Documentation and Storage: Strong system in Major Crime investigations but workflow inefficiencies create duplicate data entry and administrative burden

3. Analysis and Processing: High quality capabilities in specialised departments such as use of AI software and a professional approach to viewing and presentation with competent practitioners in specialised roles requiring wider dissemination

4. Sharing and Case Building: Well developed integration with CPS and Forensic Service Provider but opportunities exist for more streamlined workflows

5. Court Presentation: Evidence presentation is moderate due to limited technical infrastructure in courts

Ethical Implications

The force's handling of digital evidence raises several ethical considerations:

- Privacy implications of increasingly comprehensive digital data collection
- Proportionality questions regarding the scope of digital evidence gathered
- Equality concerns related to varying digital footprints among different demographic groups
- Transparency challenges regarding complex technical evidence and analysis methods
- Long term storage and retention considerations for personal digital information

The standards are overseen by the Management of Information department. Ethical frameworks to address the review, retention and destruction use Management of Police Information (MOPI), Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act (CPIA) 1996 and Schedule 18 of the Sentencing Act.

Summary of Key Findings

The assessment of WMP's digital evidence capabilities reveal significant progress and an ongoing process in adapting to the digital investigation advances and emerging challenges:

This transformation represents an ongoing process rather than a completed initiative, with the force continuously adapting to technological advances and emerging challenges.

1. WMP has established robust technological foundations through platforms like Axon, MIPP, and Briefcam, creating strong central capabilities.

2. Training programs have been developed to build necessary skills, though gaps in awareness, confidence, and resistance to processes continue to impact effectiveness.

3. Technical challenges, particularly related to system integration, data volume, and upload speeds, create operational friction that affects investigative efficiency.

4. Comparative analysis shows WMP is performing well in central capabilities but with opportunities to improve digital evidence locally.

5. The positive impact of effective digital evidence management on case outcomes and operational efficiency justifies continued investment and development in this area.

Recommendations for digital development

1. Agility

To enhance operational flexibility and efficiency, WMP could implement:

Mobile phone application (App): allowing officers to catalogue, systematically record and track enquiries relating to CCTV and House to House whilst agile, reducing administrative time and duplication

The App would also allow for Mobile phone and forensic submissions by creating a streamlined mobile interface for forensic submission requests and mobile phone examination requests, enabling officers to initiate these processes immediately upon recovery.

Community submission of digital evidence: Facilitate the public's submission of evidence and digital engagement when completing House to House enquiries by using a digital calling card with a QR code and use of the Community Portal Request in press appeals for digital evidence

2. Investigation Management

To reduce administrative burden and improve data consistency, WMP could implement:

Develop a single-entry integrated system: allowing officers to input investigation data once, either agile via the mobile app or station based, eliminating duplicate data entry across multiple systems. This has the capacity to data pull and populate standard forms for internal processes and case management file build.

3. Digital Evidence Store

To improve data flow between digital evidence and the Record Management System (Connect), WMP could implement:

Automation, organisation and searchability: Agile tagging of BWV through the use of Axon App, the organisation of folder templates to separate digital evidence streams and creating a searchable bank of data by improving the information recorded.

Integration with Case Management and/or Control Works: ensure a seamless data flow between the digital evidence system (Axon) and case management (Connect) to reduce time, administrative burden and maintain investigation integrity and loss of evidence.

Use of AI analytics: A pilot will run to assess the reliability of AI providing a case summary of an incident captured on BWV to remove administrative time of preparing handovers, digital pocket note book entries and a template for statement writing

4. Training

To improve training programmes, WMP could implement:

Online Learning Opportunities: Create on demand problem solving learning resources so staff can access at the point of need rather than relying solely on formal training sessions

CCTV Coordinator Role training: Establish dedicated CCTV coordinator positions within local Digital Media hubs with specialised training delivered by Major Crime CCTV supervisor with the potential of income generation from other forces

Continuous Professional Development: Focus on regular training capabilities in Digital Evidence to provide ongoing skill development and support

Support: Implement a clear escalation pathway from local digital hubs to central specialist units for more complex evidence types or analysis requirements

WMP can continue to strengthen its digital evidence capabilities, effectiveness and efficiency in delivering justice and creating safer communities through skilled policing, investigating thoroughly and providing victim satisfaction.

5. CCTV Registry

To improve the CCTV Registry, WMP could implement:

Internal and external communication: Raise awareness at every contact opportunity with the public from initial report, investigation, House to House calling cards, victim contact through Connect

Marketing: Continue with encouraging businesses, national chains and local authorities sign up

Searchability: Allow location, date, time parameters and time check to be included in the submission to allow investigators the opportunity to search footage as a database for reported crime wider than initial collection purpose



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