ViSOR – Violent and Sex Offender Register

David Edwards describes the new national database of sex offenders.

The police and probation service will reach an important milestone this year when the first national IT solution for managing some of the country's most high-risk offenders is piloted.

A joint-project team, supported by the Police Information Technology Organisation (PITO) is working on a shared, national IT application called ViSOR, the Violent and Sex Offender Register. This application will provide a national database for the police and the probation service to jointly register, risk-assess and manage sex offenders, dangerous and violent offenders.

The driver for ViSOR's development has been the *2000 Criminal Justice and Court Services Act* – legislation that placed a joint responsibility on the police and probation service to improve the way this category of offender is managed. But legislation has not been the only push factor as recent high-profile cases, including the abduction of Sarah Payne and Milly Dowler's murder, have heightened the need to make quality, national intelligence on known offenders available to investigators. ViSOR will do this for the first time.

access to an offender's full criminal record held on the PNC's Names database.

Importantly, ViSOR has an in-built audit process to make sure that offenders are being monitored and that nobody is allowed to slip through the net. It will also comply with both the Human Rights and Data Protection Acts.

Chief Inspector Massey said: "For the first time investigators will have a complete package of intelligence including offenders' movements, their behavioural traits and the people they associate with. This sort of intelligence will prove vital in managing offenders as they move from area to area. You can imagine for example how important it would be for an arresting officer to know before visiting an offender for the first time that he or she carries a concealed weapon. This sort of information can be stored and shared through ViSOR giving police and probation professionals access to potentially life saving information. Because ViSOR is national, operators only need to enter this intelligence once to make it available to all users."

When delivering any major IT project, particularly those where users are spread across a number of partner agencies,

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In the past, individual police forces and probation areas have used a variety of local systems with information that could not be shared by partner agencies. This made it difficult to risk assess and keep tabs on offenders as they move across police and probation service boundaries. The offenders in question include registered and non-registered sex offenders, those who have served more than 12 months in prison for a violent offence as well as people deemed to be dangerous to the community.

The lack of a national, shared application has also made it difficult to establish national standards for managing these offenders and share best practice when it is identified.

Project manager of the ViSOR team based at PITO's Blackfriars offices is Chief Inspector John Massey, an experienced police officer from Lancashire Constabulary. He said: "Not only will ViSOR significantly improve the way both agencies monitor these offenders, it will be an important aid to investigating offences when they occur. The system offers an investigative capability and will be linked to the police national computer, allowing officers to check on any previous convictions."

Through a familiar web-browser front end, both agencies will get a register of offenders, a management tool for supervising them and an ability to compile pre-sentence reports and investigate crime.

The ViSOR database will contain a broad array of information. A full back catalogue of offenders' previous risk assessment reports will be accessible as will their complete descriptive detail including their behavioural traits, modus operandi, an activity log and a full photographic library. There is also a secure link to the Police National Computer giving

input from future users is vital. That is why the project team has drawn on experience from both services as well as technical experts from PITO and the wider criminal justice field to produce the user requirement. One of the benefits of this approach is that ViSOR will be easy to use and staff will need less training to familiarise themselves with the system.

If development work goes well, ViSOR will be piloted in two locations, Durham and the London Borough of Wandsworth, at the end of this year before the national rollout begins. The distance between the two pilot sites will test the secure electronic link via the Criminal Justice Extranet and allow the project team to compare the application's performance in a busy borough to that in a small shire county. The project team has been rolling out an interim IT application that will give forces a standard database of sex offenders to tide them over until ViSOR has been fully developed. Thirty-nine forces have signed up to take that application. The interim solution, developed, tried and tested by Lancashire Constabulary, will help forces to put the relevant business processes needed for ViSOR in place and standardise working practices. Previously each force has monitored its local offenders in a different way.

The interim application, which can be networked or used as a stand-alone system, will also reduce the need for staff training in readiness for ViSOR and help forces with their back record conversion. This involves transferring existing records on to the new system.

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