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**Talent: Olivia Neal (host), Ian Bell (guest)**

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** Hello and welcome to Public Sector Future. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches in the public sector to deliver better outcomes. I’m your host, Olivia Neal, and together we explore stories from around the world, where public servants have been successful at delivering change. Throughout the series we discuss technology and trends, as well as the culture aspects of how to make change happen.

I’m joined today by Ian Bell, CEO of the Police Digital Service in the UK. The Police Digital Service, or PDS, has been established for two years, and works to support police forces across the UK to assess and adopt digital tools and approaches. We’re going to be discussing the role of the organization, where they've already seen success, and what others can learn from this approach.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** To start off with, Ian, maybe for our international audience, could you tell us a bit about what is the role of the Police Digital Service in the UK?

**IAN BELL:** Yeah, thanks. And so, I guess, the PDS, as we call it, or the Police Digital Service, is still a relatively new and maturing organization across the law enforcement landscape in the UK.

And the PDS was born only April 1, 2021. So, we’ve been working really hard to think about the nature of our mission, our purpose, and really the intrinsic links of, you know, how we perform a critical role in the delivery of the National Digital Policing Strategy, which came to life in 2020.

the ultimate ambition of the organization, is to really think about harnessing all things security, digital, data, technology, and how we really encompass bringing all of those together to think about how we enable UK policing to really get better, protect the communities that it serves.

We’re interesting blend from a governance perspective. So, we’re pretty much a hybrid organization. And if I unpack that a little, it means that, we’re a private company limited by guarantee from a perspective of how we’re governed, but we are absolutely solely funded by public money. And so, the intrinsic nature of what we do and how we do it is that we are owned by policing through the Police and Crime Commissioners of England and Wales, as well as other members of other law enforcement agencies. And we’re absolutely here to serve policing on that basis.

And I think probably, Olivia, the best way that I can describe our mantra as an organization is absolutely for policing, by policing, and with policing. we are here to work with, we’re here to co create. We’re here to think about the enhancing of digital services from end-to-end as a collective across the policing landscape, and looking at that environment from end-to-end. You know, we are definitely not here to enforce any mandation

That’s absolutely not our role. Our role here is to absolutely be a cooperative body that really begins to enhance the capabilities that we really need to improve on, that everybody in our world and across our landscape has signed up to, when we talk about the delivery of the digital policing strategy.

I think , from a contextual perspective, our aim is really continually balancing a lot of the experience that we’ve got inside the organization. So, when we started in April 1, ‘21, we were probably no more than an organization of 30-35 people. As of today, we’ve now grown to about 220-ish people. So, we’ve been on a rapid growth path.

[02:53]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, thinking there about the different experiences that you’ve got in your organization and bringing those skills to bear, I think you, yourself, have a number of years of experience and background in IT and in digital transformation. And I’m curious to know as – as things have developed over that time, what have been some of the most significant changes that you’ve seen in the space of digital technology and policing over the recent years?

**IAN BELL:** Yeah, I guess it’s quite vast. You know, my – my policing career now goes all the way back to 2008 when I worked in a single force, and then worked as a CIO for three forces. I then had the responsibility of setting up probably the biggest digital transformation program that we’ve seen, when we talk about adoption of modern tools and technologies.

That was the national enabling program wholly built around M365 as a full product suite, the world that we needed to move into from a national identity platform, and then clearly the work that we’ve done to build our National Management Center, which is ultimately, our security platform for which we manage all of our cloud endpoints.

And I guess, you know, really beginning to think about that from a career perspective, if I look back to the old days of, very much static on-premise, complexity of mixed estates, blended environments of Novell, and Windows, and, , and really the progress that we’ve probably seen, collectively, as we’ve moved towards single stack, I guess the one thing that has been relentless is continual pace of change, and the whole adoption of, really wanting to move and see policing move collectively forward in the adoption of modern tools on a basis of where we want it to be, you know.

But we, appreciate – you know, we’re surrounded by a wealth of digital debt, probably beyond the likes of legacy and into heritage. when we think about some of the products that are still surrounded by us, you know, we have the example of the Police National Computer, which is probably verging on 47-48 years old now. So, that probably goes to the – the dark depths of time versus the reality ofthe basis of now, really thinking about cloud and, the basis of off-the-shelf product moving away from the static days of application development and siloed development that saw us probably create additional complexity in our environments, rather than thinking about the rationalization capability that we’ve got now.

And then, I guess, probably the most significant change that we’ve seen in recent years was our good friend, COVID. And I think from my perspective, COVID became the game changer that really began to accelerate, for me, the increase in adoption of tools that reenabled and reenvisaged the capabilities of our workforce to probably the most quickest response that I’ve ever witnessed, I guess, in any sector on that basis.

You know, all of a sudden, when you think about the basis of what we do and the way that we respond to public service, public safety and justice, to the broader extent, we have our workforce and our operational workforce who are clearly well practiced on the front line. But then, as you can imagine, that we have a debt for services that sit behind the scenes, and really beginning to think about the flexibility that we needed to give people the opportunity to work in any location, practically.

let’s take it to the simplest point, whether that’s at home, whether that’s in other buildings, but to be able to relocate quickly off the back of a response to, the very early days of the pandemic, being able to have an ability to respond through these great tools, and being able to work with all the forces, you know, having built the blueprints, having built the designs, having done the assurance that allowed us to work nationally to think about the pace of rollout to get, initial stages, Outlook from a 365 perspective and Teams adopted quickly to give us the communication channels, to give us the people the opportunity still to collaborate, and probably recreate some of that office experience that they had was paramount.

We needed to make sure it was a collective national response in the way that we were going to deploy these tools so that, actually, nobody missed out.

That was the tipping point that said, actually, there is a real opportunity here. The digital strategy is something that becomes real. It’s not shelfware, it’s not a document that we can pick up once in a while. This is something that we’re going to live and breathe on that basis.

And I genuinely think, you know, that we’ll look back over the course of the next 5, 10 years, and absolutely, COVID, for whatever an inhibitor it was, it was absolutely an enabler for dramatic change in adoption of new digital product moving forwards.

[07:44]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, I think that’s really interesting, thinking about that chain of events of COVID showing that there were opportunities for the – the digital tools to allow police forces, both frontline and – and behind the scenes, to be more flexible, to be more responsive, to be more interoperable across boundaries, and then that leading to, in some senses, the creation of the Police Digital Service, if that was 2021, two years ago. So, there’s a flowthrough and now coming out the other side of COVID, seeing those opportunities being taken forward by yourselves.

**OLIVIA NEAL:**

I’m interested, as well, in what’s your experience in terms of how expectations of citizens, people who are interacting with police forces, have been changing and in relation to digital technology. Has that had an impact in – in the types of things that you’re getting involved in?

[08:34]

**IAN BELL:** Yeah, so I guess – and look, and this is where our relationship with local forces works really well. So, we take great pride in the role that we have and the relationships we have with our local forces. You know, the policing delivery model is complex, at times. You know, it speaks for itself, , 43 collective agencies in within the United Kingdom, all with sole responsibility to deliver locally. And by God, most of them deliver so well on that basis. You know, having sat in that role and knowing how challenging those roles are, it’s still ultimate respect between the basis of that.

And, from a citizen’s perspective, I think that’s where the power of the collective really comes through to strength. We’re able to really begin to think about the mindset of what it means, the quality of information that we deliver internally, and how we repurpose some of that from an external interface perspective.

I think most of the public really have an expectation now around digital, when I think about how we purpose and package up digital by default, I think, for me, it’s around two key ambitions that we have in the strategy around what does it mean to really offer seamless as an experience; and to accompany that, then, what are we doing to match that on a relative basis inside our organizations. And that’s, for me, really around how we enable our offices and staff through digital.

For me, from a more probably importantly, perspective, this is where the basis of making sure that we’ve got real-time information, great quality interactions, really strong data visualization, purposeful ways for folks to connect with forces.

We’ve really begun to change sort of basis of program influence, local influence to change, as well as being able to think about the broader adoption of these tools that we were just talking about, that really allow us to do that. And I think, you know what? Over the next three or four years, we’ll really begin to enhance, once again, what that public contact interface really begins to mean for us.

we need to think about the broader channels, again, from a contact center perspective. How do we introduce video? How do we think about the adoption through social media channels? How do we really begin to think about, , the interfaces of today?

The everchanging complexity of, I guess, the social demographic is continuing to make us think very differently. We have no social exclusion policy, so we’ve got to remember, that the basis of the ways and means that people have always contacted us has to remain open.

[11:10]

But certainly for me, the whole thing around, the exploitation of, , the new interfaces that we’re seeing from, if we talk about AI, how do we really begin to think about that two-way lateral that we want to have in the way that we’re going to communicate with the public, and what’s the most effective way to do so.

And we have some brilliant minds across policing who are really beginning to think about new strategies, new enablers, embedding of new technologies that will really begin to allow that to happen. And I think, for us, you know, evermore, we need to make sure that the public have confidence in whatever service delivery mechanism they’re receiving from the police service, that’s for sure. And as an enabler, we have to play a significant part of that.

our job, as I’ve already described, when we look at enabling services end-to-end, then, reducing harm, creating confidence, and making sure that in any way, in any service that we provide, has the legitimacy that allows us to continue to play our part in increasing public confidence on that basis.

So, it’s a challenge that’s relished. It’s a challenge that’s very open minded in the way that we want to think about the management of demand. In particular, you know, it will be no shock, you only have to look around the globe, but you look here, demand is through the roof when we talk about interactions with law enforcement right now. And what we have to think about are clearly the numbers and the most purposeful use of our workforce. And actually, how do we really begin to reflect on what do we do to enable efficiency and productivity through the heart of it.

[12:43]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And you mentioned there, one of the things that you touched on was the power of the collective and – and the role of PDS in supporting those 43 different agencies. And I’m curious to know a little bit more about how does PDS practically support those multiple police forces in looking at understanding, procuring, introducing new technologies? What type of role do you play there?

**IAN BELL:** For me, it’s a maturing role at this point. So, you know, I come back to the beginning, , where we talked about the blended experience of recent police experienced, recent and past police experience, blended that with great skills from the private sector, but also then the management of critical relationships.

we have a great relationship with the National Police Chiefs Council, and the chief constables of England and Wales that really allows us to think about, , how, I guess, we work from a perspective of enabling our mission as an organization, but also making sure that it’s well interpreted that we’re here to work with all of them on that basis.

And, being able to work with those strategic leaders, be that in security, be that in technology, be that in data, be that in the executive across our forces, be that into our politicians, from a policing crime perspective, being able to join all of those dots, and really begin to think about consistent communication that opens up the channels for folks, one, to recognize the work that we do, but secondly, the role that we can play on behalf of and with them, at the same point, to make sure that, we are creating a new demand for change for the user, rather than change to them, like we’ve seen previously. You know, that whole thing around user centricity now moving forwards, I think, for me is absolutely now well understood.

[TCR 00:24:00]

One of the other great products that I think we produce that really brings collaboration and brings that collectiveness of success together, , when we talk about success, I often think when you work in digital, or actually, , maybe in any environment, we all always struggled to celebrate success.

But when I look at one of the good things that we’ve done when we talk about collaboration, we have a thing called the Wednesday Webinar, which brings a wealth of international bodies. It brings police in UK together to really think about great products, whether they’ve been delivered by PDS, whether they’ve been demonstrated and delivered locally.

The webinar is only one example, but I guess at this, at the heart of the webinar, I come back to my point at the very beginning, this is all about good engagement. It’s good, open, honest communication, surrounded by good delivery, because if you can’t deliver against what you set out to do, and your promises, more importantly, then, very, very quickly, credibility falls through the window and through – through the floor. And it’s a tough position to recover from.

[15:43]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And thinking about building that trust, that credibility, that confidence, and I love what you were saying about building the demand, so that this is something that people are asking for, rather than something that’s being done to them, are there any examples that come to mind from the work that you’ve done so far on how technology really has done something tangible to improve operations or improve outcomes that people have been excited about, and they’ve really seen the value of?

**IAN BELL:** Yeah, it’s good point. I’ll be slightly contentious, initially, and I’ll say it’s probably rarely technology on its own that transforms anything. When we talk about transformation, , the one thing that we always tried to do is we plan together what we want to achieve, from a business perspective, what it means from a security piece, what does it mean from a tech piece? What does it mean from a data perspective?

But ultimately, the – I think the biggest challenge, Olivia, that we always face is – is human transformation. And how we’re going to change to adopt some of these new tools has been for me, a really interesting experience. And we’ve – and actually, we’ve seen a wealth of positivity wrapped around that,.

If we take the basis of, of transformation from end-to-end, ultimately, the next step is how it’s used and how it’s shared. we have a really good example, I think, for me. You know, when we look at some of the solutions that are available to us, let’s talk about the Power Platform and, Power Apps as a real strength, as something that I’ve seen…

Again, I referenced earlier Outlook and Teams. Well, probably the consumption of the Power Platform and Power Apps, as an adoption piece, is probably some – is treading quickly on the heels

So, , we’ve worked really hard through the webinars, through our business engagement structure to really think about the power of Power Apps and the Power Platform, and to really think about some of those niche business challenges that we can solve, how we think about user experience, how we think about the pertinence and ease of deployment and accessibility of some of these applications.

And one of the things that we’ve got within the PDS cabinet is catalog. So, we call it the Solutions Catalog. It’s managed in our tenant. It’s where we share a framework of solutions that we and – do what, and probably more importantly, forces have developed and implemented it their selves.

And actually, what we do then is we become a vehicle of really creating the awareness around these well-evidenced, these well-practiced and, to some extent, best practice applications that have come along, that genuinely solve business problems that have been debated developed by folk at the heart of the matter.

You know, and I think that’s the powerful experience for me. When we talk about transformation, we talk about changing hearts and minds, we talk about digital being the enabler, actually, some of the stuff that comes through the door and enters into the solution catalog that then becomes reused, time and time and time again by other forces, , just picking it up and then adopting it, as is.

So, , we have a – I guess a bit of a history where we’ve loved to bespoke stuff. Previously, , we’ve always seen ourselves as slightly different, slightly more complex than any other sector, but actually, do you know what? What we’ve seen is we’ve broken the mold on some of that, and we’ve accepted that there are peers across the country who are doing brilliant work, and actually, they’ve created a problem solver. So, what we’ll do is we’ll lift that up, and we’ll just reuse it,? And if we need to slightly adapt it after a period of time, then that’s what we’re going to do.

[19:19]

There are a huge number of shared challenges where we can just bring colleagues together aand do this in a pretty common and consistent fashion. And that’s what excites me, about the tool sets that we’re now adopting, that gives us the agility to be able to do some of that.

And ultimately, our workforce have trust in them., they can pick them up; they’re intuitive. Their whole base around ease of use, and somebody taking a responsibility to solve a business problem, well, that’s great. No, no finer a way to really think about the transformation journey for anybody, if you’ve got somebody who’s picking up this – these tools, and really taking it upon itself to do it,?

And I guess the final outcome for me around some of that process, around some of the best practice generator of where we’ve been, is, , how do we keep returning to sharing standard, sharing blueprints, remembering that we’re seeing response that’s changing behaviors.

The M365 journey has absolutely been an enabler for end-to-end and a game changer for policing when we think about where we were versus where we are now, and the modernization journey that we’re absolutely on.

[20:28]

**OLIVIA NEAL:**

And I think one of the things that really strikes me, as you talk about this, and you’re thinking about shared problems and the opportunity for shared solutions, is that this is a challenge that is very replicable, not just inside the UK, but around the world, in – in many countries, in many, many areas where you’ve got multiple police forces or multiple agencies providing these types of services.

If somebody in another country was listening to you and thinking, wow, you know what, having that centralized team, something like a Police Digital Service, sounds like a real enabler for success, do you have any recommendations for people if they’re thinking about how they can look at what you’ve done, and – and see whether that would be a good type of model for them to look at as well?

[21:15]

**IAN BELL:** So, I guess, whether it’s about PDS or whether it’s about what we achieved as the collective, when we started on the modernization journey, , and when we think about the adoption of 365, and what we didaround the ambition that we had, really, to bring our leaders, our users to understand what a vast set ofstrategic shared ambitions would really look like, focusing on the benefits of really well-coordinated change, but collective buy-in to what we were going to do to adopt these products, moving forwards,?

So, we spent a lot of time developing blueprints collectively, as a community. We went through assurance process. We went through technical requirements. We worked through the balance of, you know, what are the differences locally versus that of the national agencies? How could we really think about the benefit of shared standards and being able to put these into common packages that people could just lift up and adopt?

And I think, for me, that set the baseline, Olivia, not only then for adoption of product for the future, but it also set the baseline, for me, then, around the basis of this organization, around the role and purpose it can have, around the delivery of digital for the future, certainly from a UK policing perspective.

I guess, for me, we worked on a baseline initially that if we can even achieve, 70/30, 80/20 of our requirements and only see that 20% being local variance slight deviation away from blueprint was deemed okay, you know, and accepting, you know, slight different need and demand from each of the forces on that basis, then that was a huge win, right?, and it really set the principle for anything else that we collectively decided that we would do or be given the responsibility for, from a national delivery perspective.

We have a wealth of product that we will merrily share with anybody, to that point, you know, when we look at what we did, and what we learned, and how we went about our approach. And what I would say is, we’d always be very honest. I’m not sure we got it right all of the time, but we got it right most of the time,.

Most of this stuff, to your point, is replicable. whether you talk about collective community and engagement to collaborate, and really use the power of creative mind to think about, actually, you know, what are your hot topics, what are your hot priorities? How can they be done collectively? And ultimately, who and how is going to have the responsibility to be able to think about what it’s going to take to deliver, and then how we’re going to consume product, moving forwards.

Well, actually, they’re all the challenges that we picked apart and have really become a massive part of the ambition, the mission of this organization that allows us to collectively work forwards in the community that we work in.

[24:09]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Just one final question for me. You’ve mentioned through this conversation a few different areas where you’ve been adapting where you’re monitoring what new technologies are available, thinking about what the public’s expectations are going to be. Is there anything that you’re particularly excited by, any areas where you think technology is really going to play an increasing role in supporting operations in the future, or delivering new capabilities? And how do you keep yourself up to date with those things?

[24:38]

**IAN BELL:**, we’re very grateful for the links that we have into Microsoft and other big IT vendors, strategicvendors across the digital space. And so, we – certainly from my perspective, we work really hard on our teams having that focus on horizon scanning, thinking about innovation, working with forces, and, the innovation that occurs within there.

When you look at some of the new tools that are becoming accessible to us, because of the product journey that we’ve been on, because of the tools that we’ve now deployed, you know, I look at some of the stuff that this week from an AI perspective, , when I think about, again, reenvisaging our workforce, thinking about the most modern workforce capability that we have, whether I look at Viva Insights, whether I look at security copilot, those broader AI tools that don’t become disruptive, and actually still talk about the management of a human interface and a human to make decision, so they maintain the ethical nature of where we need to be, when we talk about the future of inform and decision making under split imbalance between the two, that’s what excites me.

, the whole bit around how do we generate greater efficiency, greater productivity on the basis of using those tool sets, because we now have the enabling capability to do that. What we still can’t do is jump any hoops, you know, and I don’t want to be the burdensome layman that sits in the middle, but we still have a process that we need to follow and adopt, before we think about the adoption of these new tools, right? We still believe in security by design. We still think about our adoption tactics for how we’re going to deploy this stuff technically. We still take people on a change journey.

But actually, we’re beginning to envisage how we wrap all of these new capabilities around change opportunity, and we really begin to re-envision, for me, what ultimately our productivity state is going to look like. so, you know, touched on AI and the lot. We still have a big focus on machine learning, big data, data science, the whole inclusion, then, into where we want to be from a data analytics perspective.

And I think that whole bit around embedding these tools that really begin to interest our leadership and our people values at the same point is as, for me, as exciting as the adoption of the tools that sit around and become an enabler at the same point.

So, I love the breadth from end-to-end

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, maintaining the values both from people perspective, leadership perspective, having care, considering legitimacy whilst taking advantage of what that change opportunity can bring. That’s fantastic.

**IAN BELL:** A hundred percent.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thanks so much.

**IAN BELL:** No problem. Thank you very much for the time. Much appreciated.

[27:22]

Thank you to our guest, Ian Bell, and thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. If you'd like to learn more about technology in policing, check out last week's episode on digital forensics and visit us at wwps.microsoft.com to find more information for Public Safety and Justice organizations. Thank you and see you next time

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