

LETTER OF THE WEEK - Airwave coverage

For some years, forces have been encouraged by the Government towards private finance initiatives to meet the increasing demands and bolster the limited funds available for capital projects. The new Airwave communications system is just one example of such a 'partnership'.

I recently learned that O₂ is looking at reducing the number of masts throughout the UK and I believe this will have the effect of reducing both the system coverage and the safety benefits now experienced by officers in their day-to-day work. (See News, page four.)

There is no doubt in my mind that reduced coverage will compromise officer safety and while O₂ rely on their commercial imperatives, they would do well to remember the moral as well as contractual obligations I believe they entered into with the police service.

Their considerable efforts to get this system ready for service and the coverage we have now come to rely on should be the indelible feature of our dealings with O₂. Instead, forces and officers may well come to realise that what looks like a Rolls Royce system, may now be stripped back to leave a lawn-mower engine at its heart.

In Scotland, I understand that O₂ intends to remove 13 sites, which I believe would consequently reduce the level of in-building coverage in areas covered by these sites. This transfers risk back to forces and their chief officers and I believe places serious and very real risks upon officer safety. While O₂ may be contractually able to go ahead with such a programme, it is my opinion that their proposition to take coverage away from officers, offer to sell it back to them and then, if it is purchased, offer no guarantees as to the coverage, leaves them morally and ethically bereft.

O₂ may not want to take any risk with their revenue streams now that all of the UK forces are signed up, but they would do well to keep an eye on how their current dealings with the police will be viewed by fire and health authorities who have also signed Airwave contracts.

Of course, finance is the lesser of the issues when compared to our concerns that the lives of police officers could be endangered through what I regard as profiteering. I cannot say if that will definitely be the case, but I do know that a dance with what may turn out to be a scorpion is not my idea of 'partnership'.

Joe Grant, general secretary, Scottish Police Federation