

West Midlands Police Data, Technology and Operational Ethics Panel Annual Report 2024/25

For the WMPCC Accountability and Governance Board

Introduction

The West Midlands Police Data, Technology and Operational Ethics Panel (“Ethics Panel”) is entrusted with providing independent oversight and advice on the ethical dimensions of policing, particularly as new technologies and data-driven approaches reshape operational practice. During 2024-25, the Panel has considered many and varied projects that are being introduced into operational policing, performance management, or pilot stages. This has included the examination of the ethical implications of various AI technologies, large language models (LLMs), predictive tools, and policing strategies. This report synthesises the Panel’s activities, discussions, and recommendations, offering clear insights from the Board on emerging ethical challenges and priorities for policing.

The independent, expert advice offered by the Panel is always given due consideration by the Police and Crime Commissioner, Chief Constable and their offices in making their own independent decisions. The work of the Ethics Panel supports honesty, transparency, and fairness in West Midlands Police’s use of technology and data and is widely recognised as a good practice model.

Panel Governance and Membership

This year saw notable changes in Panel membership, with the appointment of a new member in Jonathan Jardine (Chief Executive) and Simon Down (Head of Policy) joining to support the work of the Panel. The Terms of Reference were updated to clarify the Panel’s remit, strengthen its independence, and formalise its integration with the OPCC’s governance structures. Regular meetings with senior OPCC staff and WMP have reinforced accountability and enabled more effective dialogue. These governance enhancements have positioned the Panel to respond nimbly to emerging ethical issues and provide robust advice on complex projects.

Major Projects and Reviews

The Panel considered a wide range of projects, reflecting the breadth of technological innovation in policing. Key reviews included:

- Andi-Esra – an AI chatbot for 101 calls
- Officer support technologies such as Match and Merge for duplicate records and Video Analytics to reduce officer viewing time of video evidence
- Stalking algorithm – identifying high risk stalking perpetrators or victims

Across these projects, the Panel identified recurring challenges related to data privacy, dual use of technology, transparency, and community trust. Recommendations included clearer public communication, independent audits, and the development of ethical guidelines for new deployments.

Andi-Esra

For example, the Panel considered one tool on several occasions that sought to use an AI chat-bot to answer and manage 101 calls, that has since gone into operation and contributed to West Midlands Police becoming one of the best performing forces in answering emergency and non-emergency calls nationally.

While the practical advantages were recognised and have since been made evident in deployment, the Panel raised a number of concerns that helped mould and improve the project. For example, the transparency with callers that they were not talking to a real person was introduced, following panel members' concerns that it could negatively impact effectiveness and public satisfaction.

Concerns were also raised around situations in which the AI model would be unable to cope, such as with language or understanding barriers, scenarios where a 999 call was more appropriate, and issues of disaster recovery. Subsequent redesigns alleviated these issues and mitigated risks, by allowing the bot to be sidestepped in favour of speaking to a real human.

Officer support

Other projects in which AI was involved, that were considered by the panel, include focus on initiatives to alleviate the strain on officer and staff capacity, improve accuracy and analyse video evidence. For example, the Match and Merge project seeks to automatically locate duplicate records of the same offender and combine them to improve the accuracy of intelligence. Meanwhile, Video Analytics aims to use AI to recognise objects in footage and allow officers and staff to analyse video evidence in a matter of seconds and search for the objects in the footage, rather than having to manually watch for them.

The Panel raised major ethical issues, which later contributed to the policy of use for these projects. For example, any disproportionate use of Video Analytics to create a surveillance state, could infringe upon the public's right to privacy, right to protest, and public satisfaction. As such, suggestions that the technology only be used for serious crimes were made clearly, to mitigate the risk of abusing technology and over-policing. Further comments were made in regard to both projects, emphasising the imperative of accuracy for both, whilst also addressing the potential for skill loss amongst staff by increasing AI use.

Stalking Algorithm

The panel has also considered a number of projects with a more predictive or risk management function. The Stalking algorithm for example, aims to estimate the probability of certain individuals going on to commit, or be a victim of, high harm crime given they have been a previous victim or perpetrator of stalking or harassment.

Having considered and recognised the potential advantages of assessing risk and avoiding future harm, the Panel raised ethical concerns over the accuracy of the model given the possibility of high numbers of false negatives/positives, as well as the potential for the project to be considered a method of predictive policing. It was subsequently requested, that the project return to the Ethics Panel after further development.

Digital evidence

The final notable example of a project considered by the Panel concerns the storage of digital evidence, specifically the use of an indecent image database. In this instance, West Midlands Police sought the advice of the panel, as to whether national guidance should be followed and all indecent images be uploaded to a national database, or it should continue to be left to individual officer discretion.

The Panel supported the use of the database, suggesting its benefits outweighed any reservations, but did raise concerns over whether the criminalisation response was proportionate in cases of children possessing indecent images of themselves or partners, considering that to submit the evidence, phones must be confiscated and wiped.

The Panel's suggestions of a more sensitive approach, which imposed the seriousness of the offence, without criminalising children, was adopted by the presenter. It was advised an evaluation be commissioned to consider and investigate the whole process and use learnings to dictate practice and discussion, in order to appreciate the benefits of the database whilst accommodating sensitive, tailored approaches to assess and resolve independent cases.

Ethical Themes and Recommendations

Data privacy remained a core concern, with the Panel advocating for minimisation of data collection and robust safeguards against misuse. The risks of dual use—where technology designed for public benefit may be repurposed in ways that erode trust—were a recurring topic of debate. The Panel stressed the importance of transparency in algorithmic decision-making and called for ongoing scrutiny of disproportionality in policing outcomes.

Recommendations included the establishment of regular ethical audits, publication of impact assessments, and enhanced training for officers on ethical use of technology. The Panel also recommended expanding participatory mechanisms and ensuring that community perspectives inform the design and evaluation of new technologies.

Recognition for the work of the Panel

The Panel has primarily focussed on tackling live or upcoming projects rather than theoretical ideas, an approach praised in a University of Northampton, University of Glasgow, and Northumbria University report published in September 2024. The report, focussing on the responsible use of AI in policing, highlighted the support the Panel has offered to operational policing and described it, to have provided a model nationwide for the ethical use of AI and technology in policing.

The Panel has, previously received high praise from the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee's report on technology in the justice system, where the Panel's

independence and commitment to transparency has influenced the development of a national model.

Similarly, and also previously mentioned, the Panel has also featured favourably in other UK leading publications, including from the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation (CDEI), the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), The Law Society, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), Ada Lovelace Institute, Liberty, The Police Foundation, The Alan Turing Institute, and The Committee on Standards in Public Life (CSPL).