

ANPR: The Olympic Data Feed

The “Olympic” data feed is a copy of data on the National ANPR Data Centre (NADC) that is sent to the MPS for use on the National CT ANPR System. It was established in 2012 and is still in operation, used in compliance with national ANPR policy. Effective use of ANPR requires access to national data. In 2011 this was only possible via NADC but Police and Home Office assessed it was no longer fit for purpose for Counter Terrorism or Law Enforcement, generally or for the Olympics. It was not possible to replace NADC before the Olympics. The only solution was to feed national data into an extremely large local ANPR system with better capability. The MPS built a new system, the “National CT ANPR System”. This stretched components far beyond intended capacity and there was concern it would be overwhelmed by national data within a few months and therefore be unsustainable beyond the Olympics.

The National CT ANPR system only uses data that is already accessible to Police on the NADC or MPS systems, but when combined with better software than was available on NADC this made a huge difference. During the Olympics new ANPR tactics were developed, enabling crime to be solved and risk to be mitigated in new ways. This exposed the chronic shortcomings of NADC and made it clear that significant risk would be re-introduced if the National CT ANPR System was switched off. Once in operation a number of technical fixes were applied to the new system, enabling it to be operated beyond the Olympics.

The National CT ANPR system remained the only means to mitigate risk effectively with ANPR and a decision was taken to maintain it in service pending replacement of NADC. Since 2012 it has been used to investigate many thousands of crimes and CT incidents. Without access to the National CT ANPR system from 2012 onwards, lives would have been lost and many serious crimes would not have been solved.

Soon after the Olympics the Home Office launched the National ANPR Service Project (NAS) to replace NADC with a new system to meet the needs of UK Law Enforcement. NAS will deliver in phases during 2016. Once NAS is in place then, so long as all National CT ANPR needs are met, the national data feed to MPS will be terminated. If NAS cannot meet all operational requirements and separate mitigation is required through local systems in the MPS then it may be necessary to maintain the data link. In hindsight, it is regrettable that this was ever called the “Olympic” data feed as it was a means to fill a chronic capability gap and the Olympics was no more than the first urgent milestone by which time a fix had to be found. However, at the time the system was being designed the Olympic timeline was looming, it seemed unlikely it could be sustained beyond the Olympics, it was funded through the Olympics and the name stuck.

The decision to maintain the feed beyond the Olympics was outlined in several meetings of the ANPR National User Group though it was not made as clear as it could have been and it isn't

clear that all stakeholders fully grasped why this was necessary. This public facing message is intended to clarify, for the reassurance of all and as part of our determination to be as transparent as possible, why that national data feed continues to be in place, why it is necessary and how it is governed though, as stated above, it doesn't actually contain and "extra" data.

ANPR: Retention of data beyond 2 years

Since around 2010 national policy has set a retention period of two years for ANPR data. This is reflected in the National ANPR Standards for Policing (NASP) which is accessible on the Home Office, College of Policing and MPS websites. However, a problem was recognised in relation to the need to keep some ANPR data for longer than two years which may arise in respect of;

1. The need to investigate unsolved cases when new evidence comes to light.
2. The need for protracted investigation of complex crimes
3. The need to investigate linked-series offences which span more than two years
4. Delays in bringing proceedings to court after charge
5. The need to enable reinvestigation in light of appeal
6. Late reporting of crimes like child sexual exploitation whereby the victim was unable or unwilling to report the crime at the time of the offence

No ANPR investigation can take place without the relevant data. Police have responsibility under CPIA (Criminal Procedures and Investigation Act 1996 (CPIA)) to ensure relevant material is kept in connection with investigations and this may include ANPR data. The MPS felt there was a need to keep significant amounts of data beyond two years in order to comply with CPIA and support the investigation of unsolved cases and that was at odds with current practice of deleting almost all data when it reaches two years old. This was raised via the ANPR National User Group in 2014 and has been under discussion ever since. The need to keep relevant data in some cases is acknowledged by regulators, the question is how to go about it in a way that is effective but reflects privacy considerations.

There are two options, to extend the "Retention" period for which all ANPR data is kept or to specifically "Preserve" data that is relevant to unsolved crimes. Preservation is permitted under policy but current ANPR computers do not support it effectively and in reality much relevant data has been deleted. This means Police would be unable to use ANPR to carry out further investigation should new information come to light on many important unsolved cases and all current activity is aimed at solving this problem.

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In 2014 a decision was taken by the NPCC ANPR lead and the MPS to safeguard valuable older data that would otherwise be deleted by suspending deletion of the national data feed that is sent to the MPS from the NADC, applied to data collected from June 2012 onwards. ICO were included in discussions as were, to a lesser extent, the SCC. All parties recognise this as a temporary step pending resolution of how best to manage this issue in the future. The older data stored by the MPS has not been accessed for use in general investigations, though a policy is in place to make it available at Court as required, which is a legal obligation.

Progress towards resolution is being made on several fronts;

a) It is intended to conduct a trial of the use of older data. In January 2016 academic experts from several UK universities attended the MPS, along with the ICO, to discuss how such a trial might be conducted and reviewed. This will increase understanding of the demand for older data and the benefits and risks associated with its use as well as the logistics of data preservation. Any change in policy or practise that follows the trial will be made public and reflected in NASP. Governance of the trial will sit with ACC Paul Kennedy (North Yorks) and the ANPR National User Group, though, as the data can only be accessed on MPS systems, the trial will be hosted by the MPS.

b) Data preservation features are being developed on NAS, which is due to enter service in late 2016. It is intended that data currently stored by the MPS will then be processed on NAS so that appropriate data can be safeguarded whilst the remainder is deleted.

It is anticipated that once data preservation has been transacted on NAS there will be no need for the MPS to hold any older ANPR data outside of national policy. That said, Police are always trying to develop better means of exploiting ANPR data in order to solve crimes and mitigate risks to the public and should future technical or tactical innovation appear to require retention of older data outside of NAS this would be explored and governed in a transparent way through the National User Group with the fullest possible engagement of relevant regulators.

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