

Police Service of Northern Ireland

BIA Silver Command takes control



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Inspector Michael Baird,

The Police Service of Northern Ireland.

When the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) held a major Forward Control Point (FCP), as well as an emergency planning operation at Belfast International Airport (BIA), the exercise highlighted the need for substantial improvements in the Airport command facilities.

“Five hundred people took part in the multi-agency exercise in November 2004 and it was found that a fully equipped Silver Command suite at BIA could be of huge benefit to our emergency planning,” explains Inspector Michael Baird. “We visited

a number of airports in the UK to see the sort of facilities that were in use elsewhere, including Stansted Airport, where we were also given a presentation on the SMART equipment. We arranged for further presentations to key people within the PSNI, many of whom immediately saw the benefits of SMART Board™ interactive whiteboards.”

Following several months of research and planning, the new BIA Command Centre developed in partnership with the Airport at a cost of £400,000, was opened in July 2005, providing an onsite facility for the service to manage any emergency incident with the most advanced technology available. In the event of a large-scale operation the centre will act as the main contact point for all emergency services, linking the fire, ambulance and other agencies with the service and the Airport.

“We’ve run a number of exercises using all the new technology including the SMART Board interactive whiteboards, and the results have been very impressive,” says Inspector Baird. “All the call signs for our units and detailed maps of the area are now entered into the system, so that as an exercise progresses the Silver Commander has an accurate and up-to-date picture of what is going on. We currently have three Sympodiums™ linked to projectors at the Silver Command at BIA, as well as one of the large SMART Board interactive whiteboards at Antrim Station Silver Command. The whiteboards are also being used in the Gold Command suite and in some DCU Silver Suites, and we’ve

tested a satellite link to Belfast City Airport via the SMART Board interactive whiteboard.”

Soon after the Command Centre opened it became clear that the new Silver Command suite facilities could also play an important part in policing one of the most difficult operations facing any police organisation in the UK – the Northern Ireland Parades.

While the continuing peace process and greater community involvement have helped to improve the situation in recent years, the tensions between different sections of the community can create a complex and rapidly changing policing environment.

The experience and expertise of the PSNI in handling such events has established the service as a world leader in public order policing, whose advice is sought by other forces and law enforcement agencies in the UK and beyond.

One of the main Parades within the Antrim DCU takes place every year on 12 July and with the new Silver Command suite opened just days before, the event provided a good test of how effective the new facilities would be. Inspector Baird believes the introduction of SMART Board interactive whiteboards into the policing operation for the Parades resulted in some major benefits. “We used the technology in 2005 for the two major Parades in Antrim DCU with fantastic success,” says Inspector Baird. “I’ve been a fan of the SMART Board interactive whiteboards since I first saw them demonstrated, but even I’ve been surprised at just how



much difference they have made to policing the Parades.”

The new technology is now an integral part of both the emergency planning and operational facilities at BIA, but Inspector Baird believes there are more benefits to be gained in the future. “I think this is just the tip of the iceberg. Eventually I can see the SMART Board interactive whiteboards being linked to other facilities at BIA such as the Rendezvous Point and the FCP, as well as the Friends and Relatives Reception Centre and the Survivors Reception Centre. This would allow for joint briefings for all the agencies involved in an operation and for the Silver Commander to view up-to-date pen pictures of each location at any point during an incident. That may be a year or so away, but I think the success we are having with the system at the moment means that it’s definitely likely to happen.”

Inspector Baird is also confident that all officers will be comfortable operating the SMART Board interactive whiteboards: “If you can use a computer, you can use one of the Boards – they are that simple. It’s exactly the same approach and if I can get to grips with them then anyone can.”