Overview of Warwickshire and West Mercia Police Small Unmanned Aircraft Trial

September 2015

A Small Unmanned Aircraft (SUA) is an aircraft without a human pilot on board. Their flight can be controlled autonomously by computers in the vehicle or under the remote control of an operator. They were developed by the military but are now used in an increasing number of civilian applications.
Commentators predict that this will be the single largest growth sector within civilian aviation, with an expectation that SUAs will be commonplace in the skies of the UK within ten years.

Civilian applications include:

Government – Law enforcement, border security, coast guards etc

Fire and rescue - Major incident, disaster management

Energy sector - Monitoring infrastructure, power lines and Oil & Gas rigs

Agriculture and Fisheries – Monitoring crops and livestock

Communications and Broadcasting

Earth observations and remote sensing - Major incident and pollution monitoring, aerial photography, mapping and surveying etc.

Police Trials within Warwickshire and West Mercia police areas

Warwickshire and West Mercia Police will be conducting a trial of SUA technology which is planned to start in November 2015. This trial will last for six months, after which the results will be evaluated. This will then help to inform decision making by the Chief Officer team as to whether or not these devices are deployed on a wider basis across the respective force areas.

The following list contains examples of the types of incident where these devices could be deployed

1. Missing person searches where there is a need for initial containment or a suggestion that that the subject is within a fairly localised area.

2. Cannabis factory flyovers upon receipt of intelligence to suggest commercial or residential premises are being used for the cultivation of cannabis.

3. Small containments such as pre-planned warrants, search for suspects who may have decamped from vehicles, or suspect on premises.

4. Hazardous area search in the event of a need to search or monitor areas such as flooded rivers/watercourses, quarries, derelict or tall buildings and rail infrastructure.

5. Firearms operations. This equipment could provide tactical advisors and commanders with an advantage when considering the planning and control of firearms operations.

6. Monitoring and evidence gathering at events where large numbers of people are present – public order, Global Gathering / bulldog bash

7. Chemical / explosive or terrorist incidents. A SUA would not significantly alter ground conditions whilst the helicopter downdraft would. Multiple SUAs could be deployed to cover multiple angles, allowing for images to be sent via downlink to allow ground commanders from all emergency services to make tactical decisions

8. Aerial photography at road traffic collision sites or crime scenes

This is not an exhaustive list, and it is entirely possible that other opportunities to deploy these devices may arise during the course of the trial.

There are no plans to deploy these devices covertly.

Regulation & Safety

These devices will be operated under Civil Aviation regulations and force policy. An operations manual has also been written to support air operations. The devices will only be operated by trained staff in accordance with manufacturers instructions and due consideration for environmental factors (weather, obstructions etc).

Public Perception

The use of small unmanned aircraft is becoming more widespread across the UK, and they are being used in agriculture, surveying, media and a number of other industries. A small number of police forces have also adopted this technology on a small scale. These devices will become an increasingly common sight over time. However, there may be specific concerns over police use of this technology. This may be viewed as an overbearing police tactic and there may be concerns that use of this technology may lead to human rights abuses, or breaches of privacy. The adoption of any such technology would need to be carefully managed to ensure that police legitimacy is not damaged.

Such ethical concerns need to be addressed where possible prior to the commencement of the trial.

As the lead for this piece of work, I am interested in the views of our communities on this subject. From a police point of view, we feel that this will be a valuable tool to help to protect people from harm in a cost effective manner. It would also give us some additional operational capability that we do not currently have. However, we do understand that this technology is potentially controversial, so would welcome the chance to engage on the subject and hopefully allay some concerns and if necessary see what safeguards could be put in place.