In challenging times there's no let-up for Coventry's Retail Crime Operation

City-centre crime reduction is one of Coventry BID's key services. Making the most of technology is an essential part of delivering it…

First elected in 2005, Coventry Business Improvement District (BID) is now in its third term - so its 600 levy-payers evidently believe their money has been well spent. And perhaps that's truer now than ever.

BIDs like Coventry's have helped ring-fence their levy-payers from curbs on local authority spending, as well as helped them face some of the challenges of the fast-changing retail world.

Coventry BID has seen its retailers through economic and structural challenges.

By joining together in the BID, they have benefited from on-going investment in projects without which foot-fall in the city would undoubtedly have declined.

There's no let-up: Coventry BID's priorities reflect the fact that a healthy city-centre needs constant nurturing, and one of the ways the BID does so is through its Retail Crime Operation (RCO), covering the city's shopwatch and pubwatch schemes, and its team of 'Ambassadors'.

The RCO was originally managed within the council-funded city-centre management company, CVOne. A little over three years ago the RCO, and its manager Adrian Woolford, were transferred into the BID. Says Adrian: "Crime reduction was always a top priority for CVOne, and now it continues to be so for the BID".
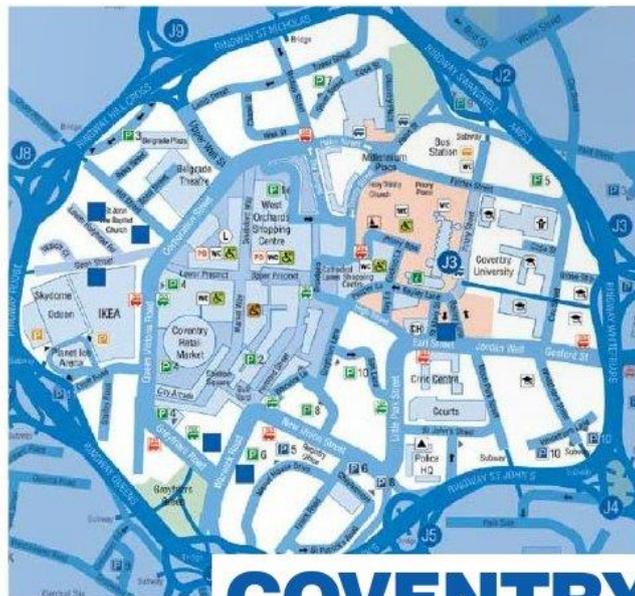
Adrian has always looked to technology to support his work: "It's essential for freeing up our own time so we can concentrate on building relationships with retailers and encourage them to participate".

Over the years he has explored a wide range of IT systems for information-sharing between his retailers and licensees. "For some years we used the ACIS system, but we needed something quicker, more efficient, that used technology to deliver more than simple incident reporting. We also used Shopwatch Online for some time and, more recently, the Facewatch crime-reporting system.

"When it came time to renew our contract for our system, we took the opportunity to look at other options. We had heard of DISC, of course, so we proposed it to our Retail Users Group who were keen to move to it".

Says Adrian: "The DISC secure members-only website really speaks a thousand words. When you look at it you see everything, and you can see immediately that it's also very easy to use. That's important because of course first impressions matter a great deal.

"DISC is much simpler than other systems we have used in the past, and that's essential when we need to encourage participation by our members. Plus it enables crime-reporting through the Facewatch system at no extra cost".

"They can upload incidents fast, and more easily, and the DISC Incident Book function enables each premises or security team not only to submit incidents through the website but also to save them into their own secure part of the website".

Adrian has concentrated first on introducing DISC to larger retailers in the BID, such as M&S, Primark and Debenhams. "The feed-back from them about previous systems was that they were too slow. The feedback about DISC has been very positive: a lot simpler to use, easier to upload incidents and, especially using a tablet or even smart phone, very accessible. The key for us is 'participation' and we are definitely getting more of that with DISC".

Adrian Woolford and Coventry's DISC system

The secure members-only DISC website includes galleries of 'Top Ten' and excluded Offenders and ID-Sought images, and enables online Incident and Intelligence Reporting. It also displays news, information on up-coming events, 'alerts' and a document library.

Arian says DISC has 'definitely' increased participation levels among retailers, pubs and clubs.

"We can use the website to update the latest call-signs for the radio network, upload Training Manuals, publish any relevant local news we might find from trawling through the West Midlands police Facebook page or the *Coventry Telegraph* website. And sending out alerts through DISC to our members is great for keeping them aware of relevant crimes in the neighbourhood, police appeals for information, 'altered identities' and so on".

Just having a secure, members-only website isn't enough though. The BID's retailers and licensees are busy people and keeping up-to-date about criminal activity and newly-excluded Offenders isn't always high on their business agendas.

That's where DISC's eNewsletter, created and sent out 100% automatically each week to all members of the RCO, comes in. "We have set our eNewsletter to go out every Tuesday - and you can see more traffic to the website on Tuesdays as a result", says Adrian. It keeps members informed about developments of relevance, even without them having to go to the website. And where they see something of especial interest to them, they click-through to the website for more information.

"Mostly we keep the focus of the website, and therefore the weekly eNewsletter, on retail crime and ASB" says Adrian, "but we have used it to promote events being organised by the BID such as The Giant Games in August which the BID promotes and which, hopefully, delivers more foot-fall to the city centre". Other events promoted through DISC include the annual Oktoberfest (in August!) and the Chilli Fest in September.

While DISC is run locally, configured to meet local requirements and, ultimately, answers to its local members, Adrian says that sharing information with Administrators of other BIDs and Business Crime Reduction Partnerships is important, to identify prolific or travelling Offenders, minimise 'displacement' of banned Offenders from one area to another, and improve the identification of unknown individuals caught on CCTV images.

To enable this, each DISC implementation can link together, in 'Data Sharing Groups', with any number of other DISC implementations. A single DISC Administrator, in Coventry for example, can link with neighbouring DISC Administrators, for example throughout the West Midlands police area, as well as with DISC Administrators along shoplifter 'rat-runs' such as the M1 or the M6.

With more than 120 DISC systems throughout the country, covering in excess of 180 towns and city-centres*, there are plenty of DISC Administrators willing and able to participate. "Sharing information is very important to us" says Adrian. "I know that some of our Offenders are travelling - and we want to be part of a group that can share this kind of information efficiently and securely, and in compliance with the law of course.

"There are other systems out there and we have experienced most of them! It's finding the one that best suits you - and for us that's DISC".