

North Tyneside Council

Report to Regulation and Review Committee

Date: 19 October 2023

Title: Annual Review of Council Policy on Covert Surveillance

Report from Service Area: **Governance**

Responsible Officer: **Allison Mitchell, Head of Governance** **(Tel: 0191 643 5720)**

Wards affected: **All**

PART 1

1.1 Executive Summary:

The Cabinet at its meeting on 27 November 2023 will consider an updated Covert Surveillance Policy. In accordance with the Codes of Practice applying to the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) the Authority's Policy is subject to annual review. A copy of the proposed Policy for 2023 is attached at **Appendix 1**. Regulation and Review Committee is requested to consider the revised proposed policy and to recommend the Policy to Cabinet for agreement on 27 November 2023.

1.2 Recommendation(s):

It is recommended that the Committee:

1. note the Authority's proposed updated Policy on Covert Surveillance (attached at **Appendix 1**); and
2. recommend the proposed Policy to Cabinet for adoption at its meeting on 27 November 2023.

1.3 Information:

1.3.1 Introduction

The Authority's current Surveillance Policy was approved by Cabinet in November 2022 and is subject to annual review. The Policy has been subject to a review by Officers and the revised proposed policy is attached at **Appendix 1**. Amendments have been made to current Policy to reflect organisational changes and revised reporting lines which have been put in place within the organisation since that time. All other aspects of the previously adopted Policy remain fit for purpose.

The aims of the Authority's Policy are to:

- Set out the Authority's arrangements for complying with RIPA; the relevant Codes of Practice and guidance issued by the Home Office; and guidance from the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO).
- Give effect to the rights of citizens to respect for their private and family lives (pursuant to the Human Rights Act 1998); and
- Protect the Authority from legal challenge when undertaking surveillance.

1.3.2 The RIPA Shield

The Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) puts covert surveillance on a statutory basis. RIPA enables certain public authorities, including this Authority, to carry out surveillance operations with statutory protection from legal challenge. It is often referred to as the "RIPA shield".

Three covert investigatory techniques are available to local authorities under RIPA:

- i. the acquisition and disclosure of communications data such as telephone billing information or subscriber details e.g., to tackle rogue traders.
- ii. directed surveillance – covert surveillance of individuals in public places e.g., to tackle criminal activity arising from anti-social behaviour; and
- iii. covert human intelligence sources (CHIS) such as the deployment of undercover officers.

The RIPA provisions may only be used to authorise surveillance activities to detect and prevent serious crime and any authorisation is subject to a requirement to seek authorisation from an 'Authorising Officer' and to obtaining judicial approval from the Magistrates' Court before any surveillance is undertaken. The Authorising Officers within the Authority are:

Paul Hanson – Chief Executive; and
Colin MacDonald – Senior Manager, Technical & Regulatory Services

Officers from Legal accompanied by the relevant Authorising Officer will present any authorisation to the Magistrates' Court for judicial approval. All authorisations will be subject to an internal scrutiny process prior to being submitted for such approval.

Local authorities may undertake surveillance for other purposes, but such surveillance will not benefit from the RIPA shield and will leave a local authority vulnerable to challenge. For this reason, all surveillance activity undertaken by the Authority, whether within the RIPA regime or not, must be appropriately authorised by one of the Authorising Officers and is subject to central monitoring and challenge.

1.3.3 Central Register

The Authority has a Central Register of all RIPA and non-RIPA surveillance activity. The Central Register is maintained and monitored by Governance.

1.3.4 Inspection

Organisations using RIPA are subject to regular inspection by Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office (IPCO).

The Authority received a virtual online inspection visit from the IPCO on 12 September 2023. The purpose of the IPCO inspection was to examine the policies, procedures, operations, and administration the Authority has in place in relation to the use of directed surveillance and covert human intelligence sources.

The outcome of the inspection was very supportive of the Authority's actions to manage its responsibilities under RIPA.

The Inspector made no recommendations in relation to the Authority's Covert Surveillance Policy and commented on the Authorities recent authorisations as "well formed".

The Committee are requested to review the proposed Policy and recommend to Cabinet that the Policy be adopted.

1.3.5 Summary of Use of Surveillance, Acquisition of Communications Data and CHIS

It should be noted that following the changes to the RIPA regime from 1 November 2012 reported to the Committee in October 2012, the Authority has utilised the powers five times since our last inspection in September 2020, for directed surveillance, alongside non-RIPA applications for test purchasing. The justification most used by local authorities generally for authorising covert surveillance (addressing anti-social behaviour) was removed on 31 October 2012. Authorisations may now only be sought on the grounds that it relates to the prevention and detection of serious crime. Serious crime is defined as crime punishable, whether on summary conviction or on indictment, by a maximum term of at least 6 months of imprisonment, or would constitute an offence under sections 146, 147 or 147A of the Licensing Act 2003 or section 7 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933. The latter are all offences involving sale of tobacco and alcohol to underage children.

Governance keeps the Central Record of authorisations under review and advises Authorising Officers/Designated Persons of changes in approach or procedure.

1.3.6 Corporate Responsibilities

The Codes of Practice advise that a Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) should be identified to ensure the Authority has appropriate policies and processes that accord with RIPA and the related Codes of Practice.

The Officer Delegation Scheme places the Senior Responsible Officer role with the Head of Resources.

Each Head of Service is responsible for ensuring effective and legally compliant systems and procedures are in place for surveillance work within their Service Areas.

All employees connected with surveillance and handling of evidence are responsible for ensuring that they act only in accordance with their level of

responsibility and training and in accordance with the Policy and associated documents. To assist in this an 'Employee Handbook: Use of Covert Surveillance, Covert Human Intelligence Sources and Communications Data', has been prepared. The Handbook provides key information for Officers and directs them towards key sources of detailed guidance. It is kept under review and revised as necessary to ensure it reflects current procedures and best practice.

If Officers wish to undertake surveillance that falls outside of the RIPA regime, they must take legal advice and seek appropriate authorisation. Information regarding surveillance (whether under RIPA or not) must be held centrally by the Senior Responsible Officer to enable the Authority to have an overview of all surveillance activities being undertaken by the Authority.

Use of Social Media for the collection of personal information

The application of the requirements of RIPA to the use of informants via, in particular, social media, is a developing area of surveillance law. Social Media provides the opportunity for the Authority to monitor, for example, individual rogue traders who trade on-line in the context of trading standards investigations. The continued monitoring of the activities of an individual or the development of a relationship with a trader with the purpose of eliciting information from the trader may fall within the RIPA regime.

As stated above this is an area which is continuing to be monitored as it develops, and Officers from Law and Trading Standards are considering how such activities should be undertaken and whether those activities go as far as requiring a RIPA authorisation.

In addition, the Authority may undertake such surveillance for activities that could not benefit from the protection of the RIPA shield i.e., the activity being investigated would not meet the serious crime test, for example, in child protection. Such surveillance may simply be the monitoring of entries on social media (e.g., Facebook) where concerns about breaches of the social media policy may arise. In these circumstances whilst the surveillance is not unlawful it leaves a local authority more vulnerable to challenge as it still entails the collection of information about an individual. For this reason, the Authority requires that all surveillance activity undertaken by the Authority outside of the RIPA regime must be appropriately authorised by one of the Authorising Officers and is subject to central monitoring.

Further information has been and will be provided to Heads of Service to raise awareness of RIPA, the circumstances when a RIPA authorisation is necessary and those circumstances where surveillance activity outside of the RIPA regime must still be appropriately authorised.

1.3.7 Compliance and Oversight

The Codes of Practice indicate that elected members of a local authority should review its use of RIPA and set the general surveillance policy at least annually. A local authority should also consider internal reports on the use of RIPA at least quarterly to ensure that it is being used consistently in compliance with the Authority's Policy and that the Policy remains fit for purpose. It was agreed by the Committee in 2015 that the use of RIPA should be reported to the Committee on an exception basis. Therefore, when an authorisation is granted, it will be reported at the next available meeting of the Committee to ensure the requirements for member oversight of the use of the Authority's RIPA powers are discharged.

To meet these requirements the Policy Statement provides that:

- Cabinet receives an annual report covering the Authority's use of RIPA powers, and review of the Policy for the following year.
- Reports are presented to the Regulation and Review Committee on the Authority's use of RIPA powers. The Committee's role is to look at compliance, oversight, and use of RIPA. The Committee will also consider whether the Policy remains fit for purpose and recommend changes to the Policy as appropriate for Cabinet's consideration; and
- The Elected Mayor who has responsibility for RIPA related activities receives regular updates from the Senior Responsible Officer regarding the use of the Authority's powers.

1.3.8 Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) Systems

North Tyneside Council's CCTV control room operates cameras throughout the Borough.

Overt surveillance as conducted using CCTV is covered by the Data Protection Act 2018 and not by RIPA. Signage is in place informing the public when they enter zones covered by CCTV equipment. The Council's CCTV control room is registered with the Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner.

If the CCTV cameras are used for covert surveillance (whether by the Authority or the Police), a RIPA authorisation is required. The Police may make formal written requests for surveillance of a target for which they have a RIPA authorisation. The CCTV Control Room Co-ordinator will seek written confirmation of this authorisation.

1.4 Appendices:

Appendix 1: Policy on Covert Surveillance (proposed)

1.5 Contact officers:

Allison Mitchell, Head of Governance, Governance Service (0191 643 5720)

Emma Phillips, Interim Information Governance and Compliance Manager/Data Protection Officer, Governance Service (0191 643 8785)

1.6 Background information:

The following background papers/information have been used in the compilation of this report and are available at the office of the author:

- Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 and relevant Orders
- Home Office Code of Practice

PART 2 – COMPLIANCE WITH PRINCIPLES OF DECISION MAKING

2.1 Finance and other resources

The provisions of the Policy can be implemented within the Service's existing resources.

2.2 Legal

The Policy has been prepared with reference to the relevant law and Codes of Practice. A number of Statutory Instruments and Codes of Practice published by the Home Office govern the operation of RIPA.

The Authority may only authorise directed surveillance where it is both necessary and proportionate to the investigation or operation being undertaken and to what is being sought to achieve in terms of evidence gathering. Senior Officers are appointed as

Authorising Officers and have a key role in carefully scrutinising all applications for the use of RIPA powers under a specific authorisation. Judicial approval is required from the Magistrates' Court in relation to all authorisations prior to any surveillance being undertaken.

Authorising Officers must ensure that authorisations are granted only in appropriate cases and that the extent of all authorisations are clearly set out.

The Authority cannot authorise intrusive surveillance under RIPA. Intrusive surveillance would involve placing an investigator on residential premises or in a private vehicle or allowing the use of an external surveillance device outside of the premises or vehicle that gives the same quality of information as if it was on the premises or in the vehicle.

The Policy, together with the Employee Handbook covers the procedures to be followed in seeking authorisations, maintaining appropriate oversight of the Policy and the central record of decisions.

2.3 Consultation/community engagement

The Policy is aimed at ensuring adherence to the best practice contained within the Codes of Practice as well as the law.

Internal consultation has taken place with Officers with responsibility for the management and supervision of surveillance activity as well as with the Elected Mayor.

2.4 Human rights

Human rights implications are addressed within the report and the Policy. RIPA provides a framework under which surveillance activity can be authorised and conducted in a way that is compatible with the rights of individuals.

The Authority must also ensure that activity that falls outside of the RIPA regime is subject to scrutiny and authorisation to ensure that human rights are respected, and the activity is lawfully undertaken.

2.5 Equalities and diversity

There are no equalities and diversity implications directly arising from the report.

2.6 Risk management

The Authority's Policy and the procedures contained in the Employee Handbook are designed to ensure the Authority complies with the law and Codes of Practice and thereby reduce the risks associated with surveillance activity.

2.7 Crime and disorder

RIPA may only be utilised by the Authority for the purposes of detecting and preventing crime.

2.8 Environment and sustainability

There are no environment and sustainability implications directly arising from this report.