



# In safe hands?

The MoD has recently received criticism for its data handling, thanks to lost laptops and other issues, but ISS and category manager **John Marr** are hoping the ICS catalogue will improve information safety

After the lost disk scandal which took place late last year and attracted highly polarised media attention, the importance of data security has never been so high. Unfortunately, this is not an area at which the MoD has a sparkling track record, with incidents of laptops going missing or being stolen also having been spotted in the prominent pages of the national newspapers.

Although there was public outcry at the loss of data by HM Revenue and Customs, the ministry's failings in this regard have the potential to be more threatening to national security; it stands to reason that high ranking officials have access to information which could be very dangerous if it falls into the wrong hands. Indeed, defence secretary Des Browne admitted in January that several thefts have occurred, all of

which held the personal details of individuals who had applied to, or already joined, the UK Armed Forces.

Shadow defence secretary Liam Fox, in an unsurprising criticism of the government, called the situation a "dreadful mess" and called for action. In addition, he warned of the "incompetence, mismanagement and poor procedures" that had led to the loss. "Clearly we don't know what risks will be faced by those on the databases – it will depend on whose hands it has fallen into. But to put our troops and the public at risk in this way is unforgivable because this seems like a systemic failure, not a single act of incompetence or irresponsibility."

Rather more unsettling, however, were Browne's remarks that "it is not clear to me

why recruiting officers routinely carry with them information on such a large number of people or, indeed, why the database retains this information at all". In addition, he pointed to specific failings with the MoD's personnel, rather than just the decision makers who allowed such sensitive data to be carried outside of premises: "Our internal investigation has identified weaknesses in the application of MoD security procedures to this database. It is clear that the database files were not encrypted, in breach of MoD procedures."

Given this, it is fitting that the MoD's Information Systems and Services (ISS) is set to take the lead across government on the procurement of data security products. John Marr, the category manager, who heads up lot 4 of the ICS catalogue, states that "ISS and the ICS Catalogue will provide an interim solution until March 2010". In addition, he notes "further collaborative effort" under programme "will take place over the next two years to define the lead organisation".

It is no doubt hoped that this element of the ICS catalogue will provide a welcome improvement to government practices as a whole – and while data can never be 100% secure, help to make sure that which is stored is in safe hands. ●

John Marr spoke to Wesley Charnock