

SPEEDY CAMERAS

New technology is helping Kent Police traffic officers to arrest offenders 'by appointment'.

Claire Haynes takes a ride with the force and finds out how the system could 'revolutionise policing'

Imagine driving a patrol car fitted with a laptop computer feeding you live information about the cars wanted by the police and where they are currently being driven in the county.

This dream has become a reality for Kent Police officers after IT staff in the force developed technology to feed live information from Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) cameras owned both by Kent County Council and the force to patrol cars.

The software links to systems such as the Police National Computer and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to alert officers if a vehicle of interest has just passed a camera in the force area. It takes a maximum of five seconds after the car has passed a camera for the databases to be checked and an alert to be sent to patrol cars so officers can choose to pursue a vehicle if necessary. The system continues to alert officers each time that car passes a camera so patrols can track it down.

Police Review went for a drive with Kent Police officers to find out how the technology works and what will it mean for those officers using it.

Instant decisions

A pilot programme using the new software started in September and five patrol cars with mobile data terminals are using it in Maidstone. The force aims to extend it across Kent over the next few months.

The traffic patrol officers taking part in the pilot programme can view live information from approximately 200 of these fixed site cameras, fitted around the county, and respond immediately. The cameras produce approximately 900,000 reads per day, reading 98 per cent of the plates which pass them.

The system not only alerts officers whenever a vehicle that is of interest to the police passes

a camera in the county. It also lists why the vehicle is of interest, such as having stolen registration plates or being owned by a disqualified driver. In the 30 minutes that *Police Review* spent in a patrol car fitted with the technology, alerts relating to 34 vehicles of interest were received.

Each car participating in the pilot is fitted with a laptop computer with a remote touch screen. The computers use software written by Kent Police developers. Instead of waiting for the data from cameras to be downloaded and reviewed, the new technology enables information to go directly to officers so they can react rapidly and intercept a wanted vehicle. The new system can also be programmed so that officers receive only alerts relating to their immediate area, so they are not overwhelmed with messages relating to the whole force area.

Ch Insp Richard Watson, ANPR lead for the force, has high hopes for the technology. It takes less than 30 minutes to train officers on how to use the system and he says it should increase the success rate of detecting crime when officers stop vehicles because they know the vehicles are linked to crime. He says the sanction detection rates for catching disqualified drivers should improve as it greatly increases officers' chances of stopping them.

He says: 'If you went back to how officers used to select cars [to stop] it would be the copper's nose – what the officer thinks looks dodgy. Some of the cars we have [caught by using the technology] are six years old, in good condition. We probably would not [have] pulled them.'

Ch Insp Watson also says the system could be used to help officers quickly find vulnerable



people, for instance, if someone has been reported as being suicidal. The person's number

plate could be entered onto the system as registered to a wanted car so, if the vehicle passed a fixed camera, officers on patrol would be alerted to its whereabouts.

However, will the system distract officers who are already busy answering emergency calls?

Ch Insp Watson says he expects officers to use their discretion about when to stop vehicles brought to their attention by the new technology. He says: 'Officers have a primary role of answering 999 calls. Some would say "Is this not a distraction to them?" No, because they make an assessment. It is important to find the car, but if it does not happen today it will happen again [at a later time or date].

'Officers could use the system to pull cars in between responding to calls. Or if they recognise a [car belonging to a suspect] wanted for murder or something significant, I would expect them to make a decision to go after it.'

He adds: 'This allows the normal Joe public to go about their work. They drive around uninhibited, but the likelihood of [criminals] being stopped with this technology is hugely increased.'



DRIVING TEST Insp Geoff Wyatt (left) shows Mike Fuller, chief constable of Kent Police, how the system works and (inset) a close-up of the computer

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Mike Fuller, chief constable of Kent Police, told *Police Review* the technology is a major advance. He says: 'I really do think this will revolutionise policing. The stopping of vehicles will be intelligence-led and it will enable officers to stop genuinely suspicious vehicles.'

Increased opportunity

Insp Geoff Wyatt, a patrol inspector for Maidstone, says the technology has been great for motivating officers. He says: 'It takes the guess work out of what [vehicles] we do and do not stop. The opportunity for arrests has been increased no end. The motivation for officers is fantastic. They have a real opportunity to arrest.'

Insp Wyatt says officers can use the technology to analyse where and when wanted cars are being driven, such as if their drivers commonly take a certain route on the way to work or to drop off their children at school. This allows officers to 'arrest by appointment' by waiting for cars if they know the vehicles will pass a certain way.

Andy Barker, head of the Kent Police's information systems department, says his staff came up with idea for the software and developed it with the help of technology firm IPL before showing it to some officers in the force to hear their views.

Mr Barker says he believes the next development will be to deliver live CCTV images straight into patrol cars via the system.

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PC Warren Jarvis, traffic co-ordinator for mid-Kent, is one of the officers trialling the system. He says his colleagues 'absolutely love it'.

PC Jarvis adds: 'It is part of what they joined the job to do. When I first joined the job just over 20 years ago, a lot of cars you dealt with were wrecks. They were easy to spot.'

'Now we are pulling cars you would not ordinarily consider stopping when you are on routine patrol.'

Ch Insp Watson says one success they have had since they started using the technology was when they seized a vehicle wanted for examination following a serious road traffic collision.

The vehicle was seen near the scene of the accident and was stopped by officers just an hour after it was added to the ANPR system as a vehicle of interest. Ch Insp Watson says the investigation is still continuing.

In another example, Ch Insp Watson says officers stopped a vehicle that had activated an ANPR alert and discovered that the owner was genuine and that it was likely her number plates had been cloned.

This was flagged up to police officers around the country and the other vehicle bearing the same number plates was stopped and discovered to be stolen. The driver was arrested and charged and later given a three-month suspended prison sentence.

Significant development

Mr Fuller says the force has seen a 20 per cent increase in arrest rates in the area where the new system is being used since it was introduced in September.

He is unsure exactly how much it cost to develop, but says the significant cost lay in installing the cameras needed to make the system work, which he says required a 'multi-million pound' investment. Mr Fuller says the new system would work in other parts of the country which have strong camera networks.

He says: 'The comfort it [the system] gives me is that if we do have a serious crime and we have not been fortunate enough to catch the [criminals] while they are doing the crime, we have a very good chance of catching them after the event.' ■