Set to stun?

When Yassin Hassan Omar, who was suspected of attempting to carry out a suicide bombing on a London bus, was shot with a Taser during his arrest recently, the stun gun again came into the media spotlight. Taser still provokes heart-felt reaction from those who support it and its use being extended and those who oppose the less-lethal weapon. Phil Chamberlain reports.

If you had a Taser pointed in your direction – you would know about it. A red dot, a laser light, similar to those in sci-fi movies, could be directed onto your body.

But the device is only aimed at rendering a suspect powerless for a number of seconds - it may look threatening but it is a less-lethal device.

This is why the Federation would like to see it rolled out to more officers, as it is currently only used by authorised firearms officers.

When an officer fires the Taser, two darts which are attached to the stun gun hit the subject, they release a 50,000-volt charge causing the muscles to spasm for enough time to enable police officers to arrest them.

Whereas Taser is only used by firearms officers, other less-lethal kit, such as CS spray and batons, are standard issue to all officers, even though they can be more lethal.

Yet, Taser has its critics, particularly Amnesty International, who labelled the stun gun as a 'weapon of torture' and wants to curtail its use.

They say that Tasers are widely used in America as a standard policing tool rather than as an alternative to using firearms.

Amnesty International has documented the use of Tasers against unruly schoolchildren, pregnant women and elderly people. The organisation is calling for a public statement by the Home Office and police chiefs that these devices will only be used by firearms officers and kept locked in the firearms box.

John Peberdy has been a firearms officer in Lincolnshire Police for 12 years and carries a Taser stun gun.

'There are no negatives and I have carried it since it was introduced,' he says. 'I am full of praise for it.'

However, despite a successful trial, the Government is resisting moves to roll out Tasers to all officers.

Last September the Government gave the go-ahead for Tasers to be issued to all firearms trained offices in England and Wales after what was deemed a successful year-long trial within five forces.

Lincolnshire, the Met, Northamptonshire, North Wales and Thames Valley forces all took part in the trials.

During the 12-month period, Tasers were deployed alongside conventional firearms in 60 situations. However, out of those 60 incidents it was only actually aimed in 40 and fired only 13 times.

Speaking after the Government's decision to allow all forces to have Tasers, Michael Tonge, chief constable of Gwent Police and ACPO lead on conflict management, said: 'The Taser provides officers with another tool whose use may be more appropriate than a conventional firearm in certain circumstances.

'It is important to stress, however, that Taser cannot be a replacement for firearms and where officers face a threat from firearms they will meet that threat with firearms.

'Taser reduces the risk to officers called to deal with a violent offender because it can be fired from a distance. It is also a strategic option in helping to resolve incidents before the risk of harm is heightened.

'Ultimately it can only further improve public safety.'

However, this summer, Hazel Blears, police minister, said that was as far as the roll out should go. She said that Tasers were not appropriate for all front line officers.

Ms Blears said: 'Taser is quite a dangerous weapon. It is a less lethal option other than firearms, but it is not an everyday weapon used in everyday circumstances.

'My feeling at the moment is that it is substantially different from handcuffs and a truncheon, and I would not want to see everyone on the streets having that kind of weapon.'

So it is likely that the Taser will remain, for the time being, in the hands of a few specialist officers.

It is a position that has little sympathy with Alan Gordon, a former firearms officer in Hampshire Constabulary, and now the Federation's vice-chairman.

'The Taser is an ideal piece of equipment to protect the officer and to bring about an arrest with the minimum of injury,' he says.

At the Federation's annual conference in May, around 90 per cent of the members said they

would want to see front line officers issued with Tasers.

According to PC Peberdy, there is scope for the stun gun to be made more available without necessarily giving it to all officers.

At the moment only authorised firearms officers in Lincolnshire are allowed to use Taser, like the rest of the forces in England and Wales.

However, it is only available in armed response vehicles (ARVs) in Lincolnshire and is not carried as a matter of course by armed officers.

Therefore the number of situations where the Taser could be of use is limited by the number and position of ARVs.

PC Peberdy believes that if all firearms-trained officers carried Taser, it would be likely to be extended for use to non-firearms officers. Next, he thinks, it be could be given to key front line officers, such as town sergeants.

'It is not practical to give it to everyone tomorrow,' he said. 'But over the space of several years it could be rolled out further.

'At the moment people think all armed officers have it, but they don't.'

The officer has deployed the Taser on several occasions, but never had to fire it.

'If you switch the laser on and the sight is on them [offender], they calm down after that,' he explained

He added: 'I have been charged with it and it doesn't matter how big you are, or strong or angry, it stops you right away. You do recover though.

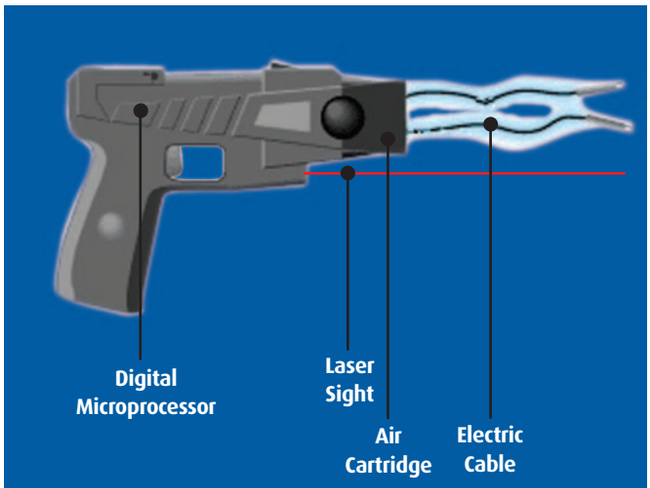
'I have experienced it and it is not something you want to repeat, but you do recover.'

He says that the less-lethal device compares with the baton or CS gas.

'With the baton, people are likely to be suffering pain long after a Taser effect has worn off, while CS gas deployed in a group can affect those not directly involved in trouble.'

Following Ms Blears comment, a Home Office spokeswoman said the policy of not generally arming police officers gave 'a character to our policing that we should not readily give up'.

According to PC Peberdy, the newest Taser models are the size of a palm-top and sit unobtrusively on an officer's belt.



The taser fires darts that release a 50,000 volt electric charge, has a range of upto 21ft. The two needle-tipped darts that trail electric cable back to the handset and it temporarily paralyses the target.

'It is a life-saving piece of equipment,' said PC Peberdy. 'It keeps the public safe and it keeps officers safe.

'I have been on a couple of firearms incidents where, if we had not had Tasers, there would have been greater force used. It is just in that position where you can tackle someone without using a firearm.'

Nick Hardwick, chairman of the Independent Police Complaints Commission, put it more succinctly when he said: 'If the option is to shoot somebody dead or use a Taser, we back the use of the Taser every time'

However, not everyone believes that Tasers should be distributed widely.

Amnesty International issued a report saying that Tasers has been linked with more than 70 deaths in America and that it may exacerbate the risk of heart failure in people under the influence of drugs or with health problems.

Dr Brian Rappert, from the University of Exeter, studies the use of force by the police and is due to speak at a major conference on less-lethal weapons this autumn.

He says that the experience in America, where there is far wider use of Taser, means the trials which have taken place in this country are not relevant. If we want to roll it out for wider use then we need more evidence about how and why Taser will be used.

He said that firearms-trained officers and beat bobbies will react differently and therefore its use may widen beyond a weapon of, almost, last resort.

'The company which makes the Taser says that it can be used to encourage compliance, to deal with protestors or get people into police cars,' he said.

'The problem with these less-lethal weapons is that you can see in the past they were originally used by a small number of people and then that has risen.

'I have heard the promise before about a limited use and past experience says that these promises do not work out in practice.

'We should think carefully about their use.'

Dr Rappert also questions how safe the Taser is and whether the trials which have taken place so far have adequately gauged their effect.

'Just because people do not have bruises at the end of it does not mean they don't have an effect,' he said.

'There are questions about how do you balance officer safety, suspect safety and public safety. It is not a trivial issue but what is need is a full a frank dialogue about this issue and I do not think we have seen it so far.'

For Alan Gordon, though, the views of Hazel Blears get short shrift.

'I do not have any sympathy with Hazel Blears. I think police officers are doing a very dangerous job which has got more and more dangerous as times goes by.

'They deserve the most protection that can be afforded to them. In my mind it seems bizarre that at one end of the spectrum we have officers carrying lethal weapons and less-lethal weapons and at the other end you are giving officers nothing.

'Recent events have tragically shown that officers are commonly injured because of sudden unplanned events. Firearms officers are sent to situations already evolving.

'We are concerned about officers going about their duties encountering sudden confrontations.'

In common with PC Peberdy, Mr Gordon says any initial public disquiet over the sight of officers routinely armed with Tasers will disappear, much as it did with CS sprays and side-handled batons.

'Ten years ago if you had said that officers would have carried CS sprays and extendable batons and wear anti-stab vests and we would routinely see officers carrying firearms, people would have been shocked,' he said.

'Taser is part of that progression. What is frustrating is that this piece of equipment is out there and known to be effective and we cannot see why the Government is resisting letting front line police officers have it.'

- The Taser runs off batteries and uses compressed air to fire two darts that trail electric cables back to the handset
- A laser sight help target the weapon which works up to a range of 12 feet
- When the darts strike they release a five second, 50,000 volt charge. This causes the victim's muscles to contract uncontrollably
- Electric signals called Taser waves or T-waves, confuse the body's nervous system.
- At the same time as it is fired ID tags are released which identify which officer used the weapon