

Wheelie bins

Doctor Who's Tardis always provided intrigue over the amount of equipment and people that could be found inside the small blue police box. But forces across the country seem to be taking the concept to new arenas with mobile custody units, nick-named 'bins', that can now be fitted into the back of a lorry enabling them to provide a police presence at short notice. Helen Gilbert reports.

When Sgt Russ Cartlidge, from Staffordshire Police, found himself tasked with organising temporary custody facilities at the V99 music festival six years ago, he knew there had to be a better option than the horse stables and mobile bar he found himself making use of that year. The environment was cold and impractical, posed health and safety problems and hampered, rather than aided, officer attempts to deliver a good service.

The grim surroundings sparked the sergeant's imagination and he set about devising the concept of purpose-built mobile custody units that could also be used as mobile police stations. Within a year his vision had turned into reality. His force converted two prisoner transport vehicles and two trailers to create the first mobile station and custody facility in Europe,

according to Sgt Cartlidge. The unit was ready for the V2000 festival 12 months later.

The trend could be set to grow, says Sgt Cartlidge, as the units, which often take only half an hour to set up, can be driven to trouble hot spots, providing back up and a highly visible police presence at short notice.

They are ideal for use in a riot situation and Staffordshire's unit was called up to the G8 Summit in Scotland earlier this year.

The flexibility of the on-hand units means detainees can be processed more quickly. Officers, meanwhile, are enabled to get back to frontline duties as quickly as possible, because the time taken accompanying a suspect to a permanent custody suite is eliminated.

The concept has attracted international interest from countries such as Hong Kong

and Western Africa and, not surprisingly, the idea is catching on across the UK. Surrey, Bedfordshire and British Transport Police have also developed similar models.

According to Sgt Cartlidge, the unit has meant an end to the often time-consuming and costly preparations for operations, which need temporary custody facilities, such as pop festivals or multi-agency traffic checks.

In the past, the force has had to rent and adapt existing or portable buildings, making sure they have suitable power supplies and communications. 'The time and resources we have put into arranging temporary facilities can be immense, not least because of health and safety issues,' Sgt Cartlidge explains. 'The police station and custody unit allows us to provide purpose built facilities,

even at very short notice, across the county.'

So what exactly is the unit made of and what can be found inside? Staffordshire Police's model is made up of four sections. The primary and secondary units are former prisoner transport vehicles, while two trailers - one large and one small - complete the set. As the force already owned the vehicles, the only expense was converting them to the desired specifications, which cost in the region of £80,000 and £90,000.

The vehicles, transformed in an East Yorkshire workshop, were gutted and the primary unit was fitted with computer and video equipment, an interview room, charge desk, fingerprint facilities, four cells and a toilet. A secure bridge was built connecting it to the second vehicle which provides a further 14 cells and a workstation.





Credit: Staffordshire police

Meanwhile, the large trailer has a suite of five rooms, a charge desk and search facility and the small one house two rooms, portable drug-testing facilities and a laboratory.

One of the plus points of mobile custody units is that they can be used to earn revenue for forces. Last year Staffordshire Police generated over £120,000, hiring out the primary unit for £350 per day and the second vehicle for £250 per day.

The flexibility of the units is behind the drive in demand as Sgt Cartlidge explains. 'As well as a custody facility, the main vehicle can be used as a mobile police station, perhaps to visit more isolated areas or to provide a short-term police presence where needed.'

Joe Molloy, the police staff project manager for custody services at Chase Division in Staffordshire Police, took over responsibility for mobile custody in September.

He says the unit provides a 'flexible response to policing events that draw big crowds.'

'It enables us to make efficient use of officer time by eliminating lengthy journeys to police stations. We can deal with incidents and members of the public at the scene of an event. In the past the unit has also been used to support drink drive operations.'

It is this adaptability that has excited forces. For the past eight months Surrey Police has

been piloting mobile custody alongside Automatic Number Plate Recognition operations. In July, its two mobile custody units were deployed to a specific junction of the M25 together with ANPR officers. In just two days, 16 prisoners passed through the units.

According to Supt Derek Mann, who heads up Surrey Police's modernisation programme, the facility has speeded up the processing of detainees and allowed ANPR officers to spend more time on the frontline. 'If during an ANPR operation arrests were made early on, officers would be off the road transporting people to custody centres,' he says. 'Now we can put the mobile custody units alongside the ANPR team.'

The force, which deployed the units to this year's Epsom Derby and Guilfest music festival, has also spent six months piloting the facilities in town centres and witnessed impressive results. Usually someone that it issued with a fixed penalty ticket for public disorder would be accompanied to a custody centre by an officer who is then away from street duties for a lengthy period of time. But Supt Mann says mobile custody has reduced time away from the frontline from between two and three hours to 45 minutes in some cases.

While the superintendent is in favour of mobile custody, he warns that it is not appropriate

for some types of people – namely aggressive or vulnerable members of society.

'In Surrey we don't use mobile custody for prisoners that are non-compliant. Because they are small cells it would be difficult to get aggressive people or those that need medical attention in there. We

would take them to a fixed custody centre.'

However, he is quick to underline the benefits. 'It's about flexibility and ensuring we can service the frontline as best as possible. There's less waiting time, the force gets people on the streets more quickly and that must reassure the public. We are not abstracting officers to custody suites, there's a quick turnover, less queuing and less downtime.'

Sgt Cartlidge agrees: 'There's an increase in the number of arrests because officers know they are not going to be abstracted from location. There's better policing.'

In terms of advice for other forces looking at mobile custody units, he says: 'The possibility for improved efficiency, [the ability to] police events and generate income make mobile custody a positive investment. Mobile custody is the future and with regard to the restructuring of police forces, can ensure a high profile presence is delivered.'

The National Mobile Custody Users Group

The National Mobile Custody Users Group was set up in September. It is designed to provide a coherent national structure and aims to capture and develop good practice and exchange ideas, contacts and experiences of using mobile custody. The group does not currently have an ACPO lead. If your force is interested in finding out more about mobile custody contact sergeant Kit Lewis at Surrey Police on 01483 482 963.

What is mobile custody?

Mobile custody usually takes the form of a number of vehicles that have been converted to include cells, a custody and charge desk, CCTV/video monitoring, fingerprint and photographic facilities, interview rooms, and tape recording and computer facilities.

Why is it becoming so popular?

Mobile custody provides back up and high visibility policing in a short space of time. It frees up officers who would usually spend time taking suspects to permanent custody suites and processes prisoners more quickly.

Where would you use mobile custody units?

They tend to be used at events that attract large amounts of people such as football matches, festivals and open-air concerts. They can also be used in drink/driving, town centre and ANPR operations. In addition, some have units that can be used as standalone mobile police stations.

How much does it cost to develop a mobile custody unit?

It depends if the force already owns vehicles that can be converted. Staffordshire Police owned its two prisoner transport vehicles. It cost them between £80,000 and £90,000 to convert, but last year alone they generated over £120,000 by hiring the unit out to other forces.