



One for the road

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Police Car UK

With 157 types of police vehicles on the road, has the time come for police cars to be standardised? Keith Potter reports.

Police Federation members and ACPO will gather together for a unique national conference later this month to discuss key issues surrounding roads policing. And while the focus on policy and new approaches is sure to generate healthy debate, so too will the subject of equipment – particularly the growing calls for the standardisation of police vehicles across the service.

For Alan Jones, lead for the Police Federation on roads policing, the issue is simple: “The gap in user consultation and national co-ordination is woefully inadequate and fast becoming a barrier to making progress and keeping pace with operational needs.

“Any drive towards consistency and improvements is not without its challenges. Having more than 157 different types of police vehicle is part of the problem, as is the current hotchpotch process of buying a vehicle, and

adding all sorts of retro-fit, bolt-on kit to it, purchased from different suppliers, with varying levels of knowledge, testing, quality assurance and specification.”

The issue of standardisation of police vehicles was on the agenda at this year’s Police Federation national conference, and there seems to be support for the idea from manufacturers and fleet managers alike. And while there are obvious potential benefits in terms of financial savings and quicker turnaround times, there are also very real health and safety and performance concerns generated by the apparent lack of consistency across police vehicle fleets. “As inter-force collaborative working arrangements widen, then the issue of vehicles, consistency and standards becomes ever more relevant to our role. This is something we as a Police Federation cannot and should not ignore,” adds Mr Jones.





Statistically, between the 43 forces in England and Wales £200m is spent procuring around 5800 replacement vehicles and on general maintenance. Remarkably officers clock up about 700 million miles each year going about their job. How many hours officers actually spend in police vehicles is impossible to calculate, but vehicles are now treated as a work station, and as such require careful assessment of how they are used.

These figures come with bad news. In the last ten years, on average, 150 officers have been either killed or seriously injured while driving police vehicles. Equally disturbing is the number of officers injured as passengers, so identifying and fitting equipment that can help reduce these risks is something the Police Federation is keen to work on, invest in and encourage.

“Although the range of issues in relation to trying to find the ultimate ‘fit for purpose’ vehicles is quite broad, we are currently focusing on three key topics – procurement standards, the future of on board technology, and manufacturers’ ideas,” continues Mr Jones.

“Above all, the overwhelming message is to strive for operational consistency in vehicle procurement and to ensure what we buy is fit for a modern police force. The number of examples we hear of where police vehicles are operating at the edge of their design capacity, or where safety features are compromised to find space for ‘add-ons’, is not acceptable.

“Secondly, we have to embrace the pace of technological advances that brings enormous opportunities for on board computer and data management communication systems, taking very careful account of how we introduce this kit, where we fit it, how we value and use it.

“Thirdly, of all the expectations for police vehicles, it’s disappointing that across the country, there is a lack of co-ordination in terms of consultation with user needs. “Officer comfort, seating requirements to accommodate personal equipment, and general safety should not be an aspirational check list of how we can improve what we

buy – it should be a priority.”

Over this past year, the federation has been liaising with fleet managers to try and understand the detail of some of the issues. Alan Jones says he’s concerned that there is no nationally agreed system or qualified method of testing vehicles for police operational use in terms of fitness for purpose when they are altered after coming off the production line.

“No better evidence of this comes from the issues, sadly leading to tragic consequences for one of our colleagues, surrounding the purchase of a certain type of police motorcycle over the last two or so years. If lessons have to be learned in relation to

“...officer safety is paramount and police vehicles can be supplied, equipped and kitted out far more professionally to meet the operational demands of the most professional police force in the world.”

procurement, equipment fitting, testing and properly-structured evaluation, then here is the case in point,” he says.

Like the federation, the National Association of Police Fleet Managers (NAPFM) believes there are significant advantages to be gained from standardisation across police vehicle fleets, and has already worked with users, manufacturers and the Home Office to set up framework agreements which significantly restrict the range of marked police vehicles that can be used in some roles. NAPFM chairman, Steve Botham, says the association has been working on the standardisation of police vehicles for the past decade, and is already “two thirds of the way there” in terms of delivering a standard marked vehicle.

The last contract with the Home Office divided marked police vehicles into three categories – low performance,



intermediate and high performance – with agreed base unit vehicles available from Ford and Vauxhall in all three categories, along with a third option – BMW – in the high performance section. The contracts covering marked vehicle procurement mean that, for example, forces looking to replace intermediate performance vehicles now have a choice of two – either the Ford Focus 1.8 diesel or Vauxhall’s 1.7 Astra diesel – with equipment such as brakes and airbags also coming in a standard police specification.

“This means that if you are buying a Focus or an Astra, it will basically be the same vehicle in Strathclyde as in Devon and Cornwall; at the moment, the only things

The NAPFM is also looking to greater standardisation on testing vehicles in full police spec. “We have been talking to the Met Police about becoming a national testing house for us, because they have huge resources on the development and testing side,” says Mr Botham. “They already carry out brake testing, which is used across the service as the police spec standard. “Those discussions are ongoing, but if we can reach agreement with the Met, and get the manufacturers signed up to having their police spec vehicle tested by the force, we will then have a system of standardised testing.”

From the fleet managers’ perspective, the benefits of standardisation are significant. There are financial



that will differ will be the livery and the lights,” says Mr Botham. “However, in the next round of contracts beginning in 2009, we will be looking to have a light bar contract, and livery (either half or full) will become a procurement option on vehicles. So when you order the vehicle, the only differential will be the radio.”

savings through bulk ordering of kit such as light bars and livery, real time savings on vehicle turnaround, and performance and health and safety advantages through the consistency of vehicles.

But is a ‘production line’ police vehicle a realistic option? “Even with one vehicle across the service, I don’t think there would be the necessary demand for



a production line police vehicle to be viable,” says Steve Botham. He recalls the experience of a previous attempt by Ford to deliver a vehicle direct from the production line; because of the low numbers involved, the vehicles were produced during August – the traditional shut down time for vehicle manufacturers, where the lines are used to produce ‘specials’ – which in turn led to difficulties for fleet managers who needed to replace cars at other times of the year.

However, manufacturers are moving closer towards ‘turn key’ solutions and providing standardised police cars. BMW have been working with fleet managers to finalise a ‘plug and go’ version of the 530d Tourer, an authorities specification vehicle with wiring in place for the additional equipment needed by police and other blue-light users. The vehicle was on show at this year’s NAPFM exhibition, along with the latest offering from Volvo – the all new V70 – which already rolls straight off the production line for police in Sweden. With Vauxhall recently launching its special vehicles division at Millbrook, where cars will be kitted out to full police spec before delivery, it’s clear that consistency and standardisation are becoming key issues for manufacturers.

“We now have the will to standardise on vehicles and equipment, where before there wasn’t too much of an appetite for standardisation,” adds Steve Botham, “and we continue to work with the manufacturers, the Police Federation and others on these issues.”

Sentiments which will be welcomed by Alan Jones, who believes the move towards vehicles being used effectively as mobile offices will see officers spending even more time as either drivers or passengers. “Perhaps our goal may one day, in years to come, lead us to an aspiration of a purpose-built and designed police specific vehicle,” says Alan, “but taking a pragmatic route let’s look at some of the solutions that could be achieved today with a bit more joined up thinking and logic.

“Let us set our standards higher, let us drive home the message that officer safety is paramount and that police vehicles can be supplied, equipped and kitted out far more professionally to meet the operational demands of the most professional police force in the world.”

The Joint National Roads Policing Conference takes place November 27 at the National Motorcycle Museum, Birmingham.



Law and order on the move

The police service has been using the motor car almost since it was invented, but began taking it seriously when, with the introduction of the first Road Traffic Act in 1930, police were rewarded through the Road Fund for introducing cars and motorcycle patrols to help curb the ‘menace of the motor car’. After the end of the Second World War the first traffic divisions were introduced and formalised in most forces, using cars like the Wolseley 12/48 and the Triumph 500 Speed Twin motorcycle.

In the mid-1950s traffic division cars were largely Wolseley 6/80s and Riley RMF saloons all finished in black of course, but by the early 1960s the volume and speed of traffic was increasing at an alarming rate, and different types of cars now had to be utilised by the police including a variety of sports cars like the MGA 1600 and Daimler Dart. The opening in 1958 of the Preston by-pass (which later became part of the M6), and, in 1959, the first section of the M1 meant the introduction of a whole new method of policing, as well as a change from traditional black cars to all white.

1965 saw the introduction of the Unit Beat Policing Scheme with cars like the Mini, Ford Anglia 105E and the Morris Minor being used in a distinctive blue and white paint scheme; the panda car was born. In the same year Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary caused a national outcry by buying foreign, introducing Volvo 121 Amazon estates for their traffic division.

By the 1970s police cars were sporting the latest in designer fashion – the orange ‘jam sandwich’ side

stripe – to help distinguish them as police vehicles; our motorcycle industry died at this time and Nortons and Triumphs gave way to BMWs.

In the 1980s police cars were becoming more varied and increasingly sophisticated, with the likes of the Ford Granada and the Rover SD1 heading up the traffic fleets, while the MK2 Transit became the battle bus of most forces in a more violent Britain.

The now familiar blue and yellow battenburg graphics were introduced as a Home Office-inspired experiment in the mid 1990s, and the car of choice was the Volvo 850 T5.

Want to learn more about police vehicle history? Visit www.policecaruk.com, an organisation run by police officers who are passionate about preserving our police vehicle heritage.
Steve Woodard, PCUK.