

On course?

Roads policing officers save lives and prevent crime, so why is their training such a lottery? Tina Orr Munro talks to one officer trying to ensure consistency

In recent years, roads policing has become the poor relation of the service. Attention has focused on reducing crime with little appreciation that criminals use the roads or that our highways claim 3,000 lives every year. Training for roads policing officers has, as a consequence, suffered. A picture emerges of forces working entirely independently of each other. Roads policing units develop their own courses, unaware that a neighbouring force may already have a course that could be adapted for their use, leading to huge disparity in training for RPU officers across the service.

A survey carried out by the Police Federation among 33 forces last year found great inconsistencies in the levels of training roads policing officers received. For example, advanced drivers can undergo anything from 19 days to five weeks training.

But one Hampshire officer is taking the initiative by attempting to standardise training for road policing

officers. It is a bold step and success is by no means assured.

"I tried this a couple of years ago and it just faded away after a while," says PC Martin Vine, an RPU trainer for Hampshire Constabulary.

This time he is hoping for a different response, particularly as he says it is time that roads policing officers received standardised, nationally-accredited training regardless of which area of the country they work in.

"You have to complete a six week course in order to join CID and that is written in stone, but there is nothing for roads policing. You could don the white cap and jacket and be out on the motorway and eventually you may receive some training.

"We want to be able to offer our roads policing officers a career path and give them credible qualifications as they undertake their training in this area," he says.

PC Vine has spent 14 years with the Roads Policing Unit at Hampshire Constabulary which has 204 patrolling officers. For the last six years he has been involved in training roads policing officers. He spends much of his time developing courses for officers which could be significantly reduced if nationally-agreed courses were introduced.

"So many of us spend a lot of time developing training packages because there is no national syllabus. It takes a lot of time and effort.

"It also means there are various standards of training being applied to RPU or traffic officers across the service. But why have different standards, different ways of doing things when we all follow the same principles?"

PC Vine recently created the first regional RPU working forum which he also chairs in a bid to professionalise the

role of roads policing officers. Fifteen forces have so far signed up to it. He admits that at the moment everyone is 'doing their own thing' and changes are not going to happen overnight.

"The first phase is to identify exactly what forces are delivering to their officers. We need to look at each others' ideas and decide what it is that we are trying to achieve. We need to draw out the key features, so we can say; this is what they need to know."

Once this has been achieved, a course can be put together that would be accredited by an external body such as City and Guilds. This would then be added to a course 'catalogue' to be hosted on the NCALT (the National Centre for Applied Learning Technologies), a partnership between Centrex and the Met. The site is available to all forces so they can log on to the form and see what is available and take that particular package rather than having to come up with their own.

"They can tweak it to suit their needs, but the course would still cover the core skills. There could be more than one course on the same subject because different forces do have different needs. Ultimately we would like the backing of ACPO."

National courses could be developed in a range of areas including goods vehicle enforcement, use of offences,

family liaison officers, auto-crime, stinger training and hostage situations.

"The long term plan is to introduce standard training mapped against national occupational standards. Officers would have recognised qualifications, not just a piece of paper to say they had completed the force's course," says PC Vine.

PC Vine wants to encourage other forces to put their courses on the NCALT so everyone can benefit from each others knowledge. There is no cost implication and there is also an opportunity on the forum to ask questions which other forces may be able to answer.

The forum is still in its early stages, but if it progresses as PC Vine hopes it will, it could have important implications for roads policing.

"We are a specialist department and we need to be recognised as such. Roads policing mustn't be seen as a 'cheap' option. This is about standardisation, credibility and professionalism."

- PC Vine will give a presentation on improving training for roads policing officers at the forthcoming Federation Roads Policing Conference on November 29.

A view from the Police Federation - Alan Jones, chairman of the promotion and training sub-committee

The main issue for roads policing officer training is a lack of national recognition and any standardised package of training that sees skills levels and accreditation of professional competence, properly managed, recognised and governed. Each force tends to set its own level of standards and assesses competence not against knowledge, skills and professional ability, but against how much training abstraction time they can afford.

The service is quite rightly moving to setting acceptable minimum learning and training levels in most other parts of the job, yet there is no national standard or line by which roads policing officer standards are measured or checked out. This is unacceptable and we must take a serious look at what is expected of a professional police service and how much officers know about the law and application of operational standards that is specific to this skill area.

It seems bizarre that such standards are set for CID yet not for roads policing. The public expect more, the courts expect more and we expect more commitment to this.

Would you fly on a plane knowing the pilot has not met certain set standards of ability and competence? The same principles apply to policing if an officer deals with a serious or fatal crash, then the standard of competence must be the same. Not to do so means we will lose the skills we have, and become less of an all round specialism that could simply relies on other agencies to fill the holes created.

The Police Federation raised the issue with ACPO in September and they have accepted our concerns to the point they have commissioned work with Centrex to look at this.