Identifying ghost license plates

Training officers to use an infrared (IR) device called 'Nightfox Whisker' to identify ghost licence plates.

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Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Prevention
Topic	Crime prevention Leadership, development and learning Operational policing
Organisation	[Greater Manchester Police](#)
Email address	cto.policeenquiries@gmp.police.uk
Region	North West
Partners	Police Local authority
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	October 2024
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	General public Workforce

Aim

This initiative aims to:

- raise awareness regarding the existence of ghost plates
- train officers in relevant teams to use the Nightfox Whisker device
- identify and target organised crime groups using ghost plates to avoid detection
- identify the offences that are associated with the use of ghost plates

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes are to:

- increase the number of fixed penalty notices issued to those caught using ghost plates
- reduce the number of individuals using ghost plates
- reduce the risk posed to the public by those seeking to evade detection, in line with Vision Zero (a strategy to eliminate all traffic fatalities and severe injuries)

Description

Greater Manchester Police (GMP) were facing issues around the use of ghost number plates. These do not read correctly on IR automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) cameras, resulting in drivers avoiding detection and evading prosecution.

Two police constables from GMP's road crime unit visited West Yorkshire Police, where an IR device called the Nightfox Whisker was being used to identify ghost plates. This device enabled officers to issue fixed penalty notices at the roadside to those caught using them. The GMP road crime unit decided to trial the usage of this device in their own area to determine its usefulness. Council representatives were present during this trial and learnt how this device could identify ghost plates that were otherwise able to avoid being identified for speeding offences. Manchester City

Council agreed to purchase 60 devices for roads policing officers and other units, which cost £8,100.

Training officers

The two officers created a face-to-face training package for the roads policing unit to demonstrate the use of the Nightfox Whisper devices.

Following the initial rollout, the training has been delivered to the following units:

- Sex offender management unit – the team used the Nightfox Whisper devices on offenders' vehicles to identify if ghost plates were being used to avoid ANPR cameras. Some offenders have bail conditions which require them not to visit certain areas, but the use of ghost plates would enable them to travel to these places while avoiding detection. Additionally, ghost plates can make it harder for the locations of suspects to be tracked if they are thought to have committed an offence. Using the IR Nightfox Whisper devices means the team can ensure it is able to track all sex offenders' movements and deter them from committing further offences.
- GMP tactical vehicle intercept unit are currently being trained in the use of the kit about its use on stolen vehicles or pool vehicles used by burglary teams. Ghost plates would disrupt any convoy analysis checks which identify if any vehicles of note were in the area at the time of the offence.
- The serious collision investigation unit (SCIU) and firearms units.

These teams are now able to identify vehicles using ghost plates and track them using a partial licence plate check. The IR Nightfox Whisper device can reveal which of the characters on the number plates are obscured, enabling the police to run a partial licence plate check on the visible characters.

Using IR Nightfox Whisper

Once a ghost plate has been identified, officers can issue fixed penalty notices, graduated fixed penalties, or for repeat offenders they arrested, interviewed and charged with Vehicle Excise and Registration Act, section 44.

In some cases, the ghost plates were handed over to the police voluntarily to destroy in order to prevent any further offences. GMP's legal team are investigating whether section 19 of PACE can be invoked to enable officers to seize ghost plates without the offender's consent.

Manchester Airport

Manchester Airport was identified as a hot spot for ghost plates usage. Taxi drivers who regularly visit the airport were using ghost plates to avoid paying the parking fee. While the taxi driver issue was what originally raised concerns for the team, the airport security were more concerned about wider use of ghost plates by individuals of interest or offenders to avoid detection. Cars owned by these individuals may have a Police National Computer (PNC) marker, which would alert security when ANPR cameras detect the registered vehicle in the vicinity of the airport. However, with ghost plates, these vehicles could escape detection and avoid a pre-emptive response from the security team. Airport security have now been trained in the use of the IR Nightfox Whisker devices so they can detect potential threats.

Overall impact

The use of ghost plates is not limited to a specific offence type, making it difficult to track how many of the fixed penalty notices issued by the force. However, GMP has so far identified 230 registered across 32 force areas, 130 of which are vehicles registered in the force area. Some of the identified vehicles were found to be involved in armed robberies and burglaries, used by sex offenders or involved in road traffic collisions.

When GMP identifies a vehicle from out of force using ghost plates, they place a PNC marker on the vehicle and write a report which they send to the other force to alert them. This enables the vehicles to be stopped by other forces. The road crime unit has received positive feedback from other forces about this approach and have been asked how they're detecting the ghost plates, leading to them having calls with other forces explaining how the IR Nightfox Whisker devices work. This intervention has therefore already influenced other forces to adopt a similar approach to tackling ghost plates.

The intervention has also raised senior leadership's awareness of ghost plates.

Learning

The involvement of and approval of funding by Manchester City Council was vital for the success of this intervention. The IR Nightfox Whisker devices are expensive, therefore forces looking to use them must secure funding to do so. This was straightforward for GMP to achieve as the council

representatives who attended the trial of the device were impressed by its usefulness.

One challenge this intervention has faced is the difficulty of using the IR Nightfox Whisker devices in the daylight, which prevents them from functioning correctly. There is no such issue in the dark, therefore their usage is limited to the evening and night-time.

It is important to consider the wide variety of teams that could benefit from the detection of ghost plates as they are often used by those committing other offences. Collaboration with and training of other units is therefore vital. The use of ghost plates is almost always related to another, more serious offence, whether it be speeding, dodging fines, selling drugs or smuggling goods.

The road crime unit had some difficulty delivering training to the whole roads policing team as they were often pulled out of scheduled training sessions to deal with emergencies. However, training has been scheduled in for the remaining officers.

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