

# CAR CRUISERS

## A PARTNERSHIP BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN 'CAR CRUISERS' AND THE AUTHORITIES

AVON AND SOMERSET CONSTABULARY, ENGLAND, 2002

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### **SUMMARY:**

The 'car cruise' phenomena has gathered speed faster than police forces could react to it. From early 1999 the Avon and Somerset Constabulary began to experience what initially appeared to be spontaneous gatherings of several hundred modified cars upping existing police and community concerns about smaller such gatherings. A minor nuisance rapidly grew into something far more worrying, challenging public safety and intimidating legitimate users of car parking areas.

Control of 'cruises' were invariably thwarted by limited intelligence forewarning of proposed events and the lack of effective, established policing tactics to deal with a highly mobile public order situation involving several hundred vehicles.

We recognised that a solution to the problem began with an intelligence led understanding of how and when events were being organised coupled with an effective police response that constrained activity whilst reassuring communities that order could be maintained. Although gaining immediate control of 'cruises' already underway was important it was also recognised that control alone was not the solution, we needed to understand and be responsive to the culture. A viable alternative for 'cruisers' - the sanctioned event - was essential to give them a safe, organised focus for their interest. They were just big kids (in flash cars) on street corners (car parks) because they had nowhere else to go.

Control gained and a sanctioned event established it fell to the police to capitalise on the opportunity it presented. That opportunity was to build necessary bridges with the 'cruisers' whereby we can impart our professional knowledge to help them remain safe on the roads, their vehicle modifications legal and their expensive vehicles out of criminals hands.

Immediate success has been measured by the demise of unsanctioned 'cruises' in Avon and Somerset, the unquestionable support for the first sanctioned 'cruise' - Weston Wheels; The Revolution - from 'cruisers' and the magazines which promote their interest as well as the opportunities generated for the delivery of casualty and crime reduction messages hitherto impossible because of the barriers that artificially separated 'cruisers' and the authorities. Long term success will be measured by the sustainability of the Avon and Somerset response and it's adoption across a wider region.

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# INTRODUCTION

Avon and Somerset with its expanse of resorts has always attracted groups of youths in search of weekend entertainment.

The 1990's saw interest in modified cars grow with locals congregating in car parks in many of the large towns and cities across the force. 'Car cruises' were a reality and an established part of youth culture.

As the years rolled on attendees increased to 100 in Weston-super-Mare with visitors joining the locals. Parking up, chatting and playing in-car entertainment (ICE) systems occasionally generated nuisance calls but they were not causing any great problems.

Thereafter, a circuit run of two miles started with vehicles running in convoy from the sea front to McDonalds restaurant and back. Some cars were racing through town and back again. The police and council stepped in and gates installed on the sea front hoping, in vain, it would stop 'cruises'.

In the late 1990's 'cruisers' moved onto retail centres and the 'cruises' grew into much larger, several hundred vehicle events. An occasional minor nuisance had been superseded by major, unregulated events challenging public safety and intimidating legitimate users of car parks.

Unrefined policing tactics mobilised 'cruisers' into playing a dangerous game of cat and mouse. Venues changed at a moments notice. A Weston-super-Mare 'cruise' often ended up 15 miles later in Bristol or South Gloucestershire.

Event planning across the internet, no organisational structure and text messaging at 'cruises' conspired to thwart police responses. Nothing in the ACPO Manuals on Public Order or Roads Policing dealt with this crazy interface between Traffic and Disorder.

On the 26/02/00 a 2000 vehicle 'cruise' took place at Avonmeads, Bristol which was, to that date, the largest known cruise in the UK.

Police presence was high but struggled to maintain order. We could not prevent the hijacking of the car park nor the activity that fuelled 'cruisers' - loud music from ICE's, 'burnouts' and 'doughnuts' (spectacular displays of tyre wrecking driving), semi-clab young ladies and 'cruiser' magazine camera teams busily preparing their next edition.

## Catalyst for change

Avonmeads and the tragic consequences of a driving stunt at a Northamptonshire 'cruise' the following month, where a spectator received severe injuries, marked the beginning of change.

Effectively beyond our control, complaints abounded, businesses were badly affected and it only a matter of time before we suffered the same consequences as Northamptonshire the problem needed addressing from a different perspective.

We were not alone. Forces across the country were also struggling prompting the National Operations Faculty, Bramshill to organise a 'cruise' workshop and seminar. Both posed more questions than answers with no clear direction emerging as to a solution.

We, prior to the National Operations Faculty interest, initiated a problem solving approach and were convinced that the solution rested in a partnership between 'cruisers', business, Local Authority and Police.

## Objectives

Acknowledging we were faced with a real problem we began by defining our objectives:

- To reduce the incidents of and problems associated with 'illegal cruises'.
- To reduce demands upon the police.

- To reduce community fears.

Having initially established the objectives we commenced the scanning element of the SARA process.

## SCANNING

Scanning encompassed all aspects of the problem, thus it identified, with evidence, a variety of issues relative to the 'cruiser' problem. (source of evidence in brackets)

- 'Cruising' had been a minor issue for years. Low key, predominantly local in nature and broadly tolerated except when individuals became over boisterous. (Anecdotal evidence from communities and police officers)
- Since early 1999 the force had experienced larger yet apparently spontaneous gatherings in retail car parks. (Complaints from communities, retailers, incident logs and evidence of police officers)
- Some gatherings were attracting several hundred vehicles with evidence, derived from stop checks, that many were travelling for up to two hours to reach their destination. (Evidence of police officers)
- The large number of attendees, irresponsible driving and boisterous behaviour intimidated otherwise lawful users of car parks. (Complaints from retailers)
- Associated noise pollution, in particular from ICE's generated complaints from residents further afield. (Police incident logs)
- The in-flux of vehicles caused traffic problems in the vicinity of 'cruises'. (Evidence of police officers)
- Some modifications are inherently dangerous. In some instances the vehicle owners spend so much on a glossy exterior

that basic, unseen safety issues are ignored. (Evidence of police vehicle examiners)

- Limited intelligence, the highly mobile nature of events and lack of effective, established policing tactics to deal with a vehicle based public order situation invariably thwarted police efforts. (Police debriefs post events)
- Predominantly 'cruisers' are not criminally minded but collectively they cause widespread nuisance because they have nowhere else to go to share their interest. (Feedback from 'cruisers')
- The phenomena is supported and progressed by the wide circulation of glossy magazines targeted at 'cruisers'. (Presence of photographers at events, contents of magazines)
- It was common practice for 'cruisers' to attend events in different parts of the country, their first hand knowledge and the content of magazines reinforced that there was not a consistent policing policy across forces and within force areas. Lack of consistency bred contempt and distrust of the police. (Feedback from 'cruisers', magazines, liaison with other forces, National Operations Faculty)

## ANALYSIS

Not constrained by the traditional analysis of the Victim, Offender, Location triangle we recognised this to be a more complex issue by nature of its scale and mobility. We therefore sought to identify and address other factors that contributed to the problem.

### Victim

Dependant on the locality this could be a permutation of any of the following:

- Residents

- Business premises
- Displaced customers
- Affected motorists

Apart from 'cruisers' changing their behaviour or target hardening specific sites, which would displace 'cruisers' to another venue, it was felt that victims could do little to protect themselves from the impact 'cruises' had upon them to date.

## Offender

Identifying and prioritising offenders would prove to be very difficult raising questions of:

- Who organises 'cruises'?
- Should we criminalise all who attend 'cruises'?
- What responsibility do the magazines have?
- If we could identify them, which offenders should we prioritise?
  - Organisers
  - Attendees
  - The boisterous element
  - Those with unsafe vehicles
- How widespread is the interest?
- How thinly would we be spread in targeting discrete offenders?

The organisation of 'cruises' was via the largely anonymous internet. We suspected the magazines were major organisers but they remained careful to distance themselves, disclaiming any suggestion that they were connected with organisers. The stance they maintain is that they respond to speculation of proposed events and would continue to do so in the hope of achieving good photographs.

'Cruisers' are predominantly, but not exclusively, males under the age of thirty with substantial disposable income to spend on their vehicles but

also includes a great many females enthusiasts. Attendees are drawn from a huge geographical area spreading at least a hundred miles in any direction.

Predominantly not criminally minded collectively 'cruisers' cause widespread nuisance and danger when their enthusiasm and driving behaviour gets out of hand. They have a sincere desire to assemble and share in their common interest but had nowhere legitimate to go.

A history of confrontation between 'cruisers' and the police meant they were generally unreceptive to advice or direction regarding safety, driver behaviour and the nuisance factor of large, unregulated 'cruises'.

'Cruisers' had learnt that police forces were not readily equipped to deal with their gatherings and capitalised on the situation.

## Location

On a local, basis it would be possible to address specific locations in partnership with:

- Landowners
- Businesses
- Local authority

And implement effective;

- Policing measures
- Target hardening

Which would likely displace 'cruiser' activity elsewhere, possibly much further afield. However, when viewed from a wider perspective the force area has natural appeal for 'cruisers' because;

- It is situated on the M4 and M5 motorways
- It is easily accessible, at mid-point for 'cruisers' from as far afield as London, Midlands, Cornwall and West Wales

- It has a number of sites with natural 'cruiser' appeal on the motorway corridor;
  - Weston-super-Mare seafront
  - Winterstoke Road Retail Park, Weston-super-Mare
  - Cribbs Causeway, South Gloucestershire
  - Avon Meads, Bristol
  - Canons Marsh, Bristol
  - And Others.

The established appeal of the area led to a realisation that it was unlikely that 'cruisers' would easily allow displacement of their interest elsewhere.

'Cruising' in one guise or another was a phenomenon that we had to address in our own backyard.

## Police

We understood our policy:

*'We will not encourage, authorise or condone 'cruises' on the highway or other land without the owners express authority and will act to prevent and control such activity in the interests of public safety.'*

but were not confident that we were consistently communicating that position to 'cruisers'.

PC Clive Raw, Traffic Intelligence Officer, understood how 'cruises' were organised on the internet but our intelligence gathering abilities were lacking in robustness. He did not have unrestricted access to the internet, nor hence, the ability to predict when or where 'cruises' were going to occur.

Policing tactics were immature. We understood both roads and public order policing but had not effectively mastered the interface between the two. 'Cruises' required the deployment of between 80 to 100 officers. Lost opportunity and additional overtime costs for each 'cruise' was up to £20,000. With up to 10 cruises each year the annual policing costs were close to £200,000.

## Local Authority

Although a force wide problem the re-occurring magnet for 'cruisers' was Weston-super-Mare. The council recognised that situation and the irony of engaging with the police in target hardening sites, making 'cruisers' unwelcome yet also spending many thousands on promoting the town as a resort.

As home to the largest annual Enduro motorcycle race in Europe the town had considerable experience in hosting major motoring events.

Neither the Police or the Local Authority had credibility with 'cruisers' because of the confrontation that historically existed between them.

## The objectives revisited

Having completed the analysis of the problem we revisited the objectives and added two more:

- To better inform the police response improve our intelligence gathering capability.
- To provide a sanctioned 'cruise' that has community and authorities support whilst meeting the needs of 'cruisers'.

At this stage we saw the solution as requiring:

- Proactive use of the internet to gather intelligence and persuade organisers not to organise 'illegal cruises' in our force area thus reducing the incidents.
- The refining of police tactics thus demonstrating that we are capable of constraining activity whilst reinforcing the message that we support safe, sanctioned 'cruises'.
- The identification of an organiser who had credibility with 'cruisers', working in partnership with North Somerset Council to ease the organisational and political

difficulties of getting such an event sanctioned and piloted.

## RESPONSE

### Intelligence

An internet connection was established for the use of the Traffic Intelligence Officer, PC Clive Raw. He:

- Developed a more detailed understanding of the, use of 'cruiser' websites, message boards and chatrooms.
- Proactively searched for details of proposed events.
- Posted advisory messages warning of the Avon and Somerset policy on 'cruising' in the area which now reads:

*'The Avon and Somerset Constabulary does not encourage, authorise or condone the activity generally known as 'cruises' and will act to prevent and control such activity in the interests of public safety. However, we continue to be receptive to genuine and responsible organisers who wish to arrange a legal and properly organised event away from the highway and public space.'*

- Corresponded directly with those seeking to organise events delivering similar, but personal, advisory messages by
  - E-mail.and following internet subscriber checks under the Data Protection Act by
  - Letter
  - In person, if appropriate.
- Identified parties potentially interested in and capable of organising sanctioned 'cruises' and opened channels of dialogue.

### Operations

As intelligence informed us of 'cruises' a police response was initiated which included:

- Liaison with affected parties, landowners and Local Authorities advising them of target hardening measures to consider.
- Preparation of media strategy
- Deployment of uniformed patrols with specialist Roads Policing and Public Disorder trained officers
- Distribution of advisory flyers to 'cruisers'
- Post event debriefs

Between 26/02/2000 and 06/05/2001 we had prior knowledge of and policed twelve cruises. Four cruises that we were prepared for never took place.

Post event debriefs were crucial in evaluating the effectiveness of command, tactics and legislation employed to prevent the formation of large gatherings or convoys. Each debrief informed the policing for the next event thus refining our approach but retaining a consistent message of no support for 'illegal cruises' whilst actively promoting sanctioned, properly organised, safe 'cruises'.

### Partnership towards a sanctioned 'cruise'

Throughout 2000 and into 2001 there was a strong emphasis on forming a partnership through which a sanctioned 'cruise' could be organised in Westonsuper-Mare. The police and Vivienne Thomson of North Somerset Council were united in the ideology that the town could host a sanctioned 'cruise' off the highway whilst recognising that the critical success factors would be elected representative (Councillor) support and an organiser having credibility with 'cruisers'.

Through the internet PC Clive Raw communicated with many potential organisers, one in particular, Simon, proved promising in the belief that he would find someone to pull an event together.

The council were also working hard and with a split in support for a sanctioned 'cruise' among Councillors, Councillor Elfan Ap Rees convinced his colleagues to form a working party to consider the feasibility. Councillor support was subsequently won but Simon proved unable to come up with an organiser.

However, in April 2001 the interest stimulated a simultaneous approach to the police and the council from Tristan Bacon, local to Weston-super-Mare and loosely connected to 'cruising', offering to put an event together. He had no previous experience of organising events but bags of energy and credibility. He was welcomed with open arms.

An event on the 26th August 2001 was agreed and all hands were put to the pump to cut through organisational issues that would frighten most people off.

The Council and police freely gave their respective expertise, guiding Tristan over, or removing, many hurdles they had control of. Wherever possible financial issues were put to one side and both organisations put extra energy into event planning in anticipation of a longer term win-win resolution.

## Cruise 27/05/01

Knowing there was a legal 'cruise' in the pipeline the new Head of Road Policing, Superintendent Lawrie Lewis, pulled together all of the tactical learning from previous 'cruises' adding his own experience of dealing with warehouse parties. The operational response demonstrated to 'cruisers' that the police could:

- Effectively constrain their immediate activities.
- Create a situation that did not provide good photo opportunities for magazines
- Be one step ahead of any displacement.

and that we;

- Held the evidence to support any future prosecutions.

Throughout, our response reinforced the message that we were actively supporting the proposed sanctioned 'cruise'.

The police command structure, under a Silver Commander, had two complementary Bronze Commands. Bronze 1 - the Public Order response and Bronze 2 - the Road Policing response.

Tactically, we knew 'cruisers' would stream into town throughout the late afternoon and early evening, form small groups in numerous car parks and as darkness fell gather together for the 'cruise'.

As groups formed police units with video taping facilities moved in to support landowners (or agents) requesting 'cruisers' to leave. The senior officer present then issued a warning that the proposed 'cruise' constituted a public nuisance and 'cruisers' faced the possibility of arrest and prosecution.

As groups were moved on we knew that the majority would seek to regroup. As a deliberate ploy one car park was not subjected to any police action and as expected it rapidly filled. At an early stage police units sealed off one of the two entrances allowing drivers so minded to stream in through the other. Believing they had out-smarted the police several hundred vehicles were packed in so tightly they could not move unless the last vehicles first reversed out of the car park.

Having successfully assembled altogether, the normal signal for the start of a 'cruise'- car park driving stunts and a road convoy - the senior officer present acted on the belief that any attempt by vehicles to leave the car park would signal the start of a road convoy or 'cruise'. In the interests of public safety and to prevent congestion the police exercised powers under Sec. 35 of the RTA and prevented vehicular access to the road until a route to the motorway had been secured with a series of temporary road closures. Prior to 'releasing' the vehicles the

senior officer present issued a warning over a PA system.

As vehicles left, under police escort to the motorway, registration numbers were recorded using an Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) system and subsequently each keeper was sent a further advisory letter.

The remainder of the summer was 'cruise' free.

There were some attempts to organise 'cruises' on the internet but they were quickly challenged by police messages emphasising the damage they could do to the partnership work ongoing to organise the proposed sanctioned event.

## Weston Wheels - The Revolution 26/08/01

Organised predominantly on council owned land the event was an overwhelming success. Over 3000 vehicles, twice as many as were anticipated, attended forcing the gates to open ahead of schedule.

The event was extensively supported by sponsorship from local businesses.

A council team, led by Vivienne Thomson were on site and demonstrated amazing flexibility in supporting the organisers by making risk assessments and agreeing immediate variations in the site plan by opening up additional land and expanding the car parking.

The initial policing operation was to provide a large presence in the town but minimal activity in the vicinity of the event creating an atmosphere that this was a 'cruise' without fear of police intervention. The sheer numbers attending threatened to overwhelm the organisation and contravene Health and Safety stewarding levels. To further support the event the police responded by spontaneously accepting a shared responsibility for site safety and placed a team of suitably trained officers (3 x Support Groups) on site.

The event closed on time with none of the problems traditionally associated with cruises and widespread support from local media, 'cruise' magazines and the cruising community.

## Sleeping with the enemy - debrief & more objectives

Success was immediately acknowledged in many mediums and the key parties recognised that sanctioned events were the way ahead and would be repeated.

Further objectives were added;

- To breakdown barriers between the authorities and 'cruisers' whereby we could constructively impart our professional knowledge to promote road safety, legal, safe vehicle modifications and vehicular crime reduction.
- To promote the strategy to other forces.

The event debrief involved the key parties along with an invitation extended to the four main cruiser magazines, some questioned the move as a bridge too far, they were after all the enemy. - Redline and Fast Car responded.

Their involvement was the most useful aspect of the debrief giving quality feedback on the views and needs of 'cruisers'. Their views have been incorporated into the next sanctioned 'cruise' planned for the 25/08/02.

Following on from the debrief;

- Interviews putting across the police perspective were conducted for magazines and internet sites.
- A partnership was formed with Redline Magazine and a cruiser v police kart racing event organised.
- Redline are sponsoring a modified 'police liveried' show car for the next sanctioned 'cruise'.



The credibility afforded by association with Redline and the positive media the Constabulary has gained creates the conditions through which we can constructively impart our professional knowledge. The sanctioned 'cruise' on 25/08/02 will include a police exhibition with:

- Livered show car to attract cruisers interest
- Vehicle security advice with a competition giving away sponsored Thatcham immobilisers.
- Advice on safe vehicle modifications.
- Driving advice focusing on hazard recognition and defensive driving.

Since 26/08/01 we have continued promoting our no 'illegal cruises' stance. Some initial attempts to generate interest in an event have been countered with advisory messages on the internet leading to an immediate stand down from 'cruisers'.

With the exception of a large 'cruise' on 31/03/02 where we proactively responded by making a number of arrests for causing a public nuisance and a very small gathering on the 05/05/02 which would in all likelihood have passed un-noticed had we not been aware of the possibility of an event we continue to be 'cruise' free with indication that 'cruisers' are now looking elsewhere to promote any illegal side of their activity.

## ASSESSMENT

Assessment has been ongoing.

### Reduction in incidents of 'illegal cruises'

Except for the sanctioned event of the 26/08/01 the force was 'cruise' free from 27/05/01 to 31/03/02 whereas 'cruises' have proliferated in other parts of the country. The very small turn out of 'cruisers' on 05/05/02 indicates that our strategy of supporting sanctioned events whilst

proactively dealing with the public nuisance caused by unauthorised 'cruises' is diverting support and interest into the sanctioned event.

The response to each 'cruise' was costed and debriefed. Lessons learned were incorporated into future responses.

Displacement was anticipated and catered for within force by ensuring that the no 'cruising' message was disseminated as an Avon and Somerset issue and not just Weston-super-Mare and Bristol.

Post the sanctioned event of 26/08/01 a survey revealed that we reduced distant problems by up to 75% over that weekend. As soon as there was evidence that 'cruises' were displacing to other force areas we offered our experience. Several forces have subsequently approached us for advice and the strategy has been presented to regional and national policing forums.

### Reduction of demand upon the Police

Each 'cruise', considering the lost opportunity for generic policing and overtime, cost £20,000 or £200,000 for the financial year.

The policing costs of the first sanctioned 'cruise' was less than £20,000 representing an annual efficiency saving of £180,000. Policing effort will decline further as confidence grows that there will not be a parallel 'illegal cruise'.

'Cruisers' now understand, our stance and there are many examples of them reinforcing it themselves. Further, Weston Wheels also monitor the internet and actively promote the no 'illegal cruise' stance on behalf of the force.

### Reduction in community fears

Community concerns have subsided and the sanctioned 'cruise' viewed as a positive attraction for the town. Businesses are actively sponsoring the next event on 25/08/02. Hoteliers and traders report an uplift in trade over the sanctioned 'cruise' weekend.

Retail centres no longer feel threatened nor need to provide additional security and target hardening. In stark contrast to 'illegal cruises' the sanctioned 'cruise' generated no public complaints.

## Improved intelligence gathering

The cost of developing an intelligence led understanding and monitoring of activity has been costed at 1/3 Constable commitment for two years. This will decline as sanctioned 'cruises' become the norm and there is less need to be proactive in this regard.

No 'cruises' occurred that we had not predicted.

## The sanctioned 'cruise'

There is now overwhelming support from 'cruisers' and their magazines for sanctioned 'cruises' in preference to 'illegal' activity.

## Breaking down barriers

The response of Redline, articles in other magazines and comments promulgated across the internet are encouraging.

In addition to sponsoring the 'show car' and the karting event Redline are discussing the feasibility of running regular police articles in their magazine:

- Frequently Asked Questions - 'The Old Bill Perspective'.

- Driving skills from the police driving manual de-jargoned and written in 'cruiser' speak - 'Drive like the Old Bill Does'.

All the indications are positive with a history of confrontation giving way to one of mutual respect through which we can promote further positive learning regarding road safety, vehicle safety and crime prevention.

## Promoting the strategy

We have promoted the strategy to other forces:

- Regionally through the Senior Traffic Officers Conference and Traffic Intelligence Conference.
- Nationally to the National Traffic Intelligence Conference and the Contemporary Issues in Roads Policing Course at Bramshill
- Nationally by PNC message gateway, offering access to advice on how we have handled the situation whilst seeking to develop a structured approach of events at different times of the year.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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