



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

Home Office: Reducing vehicle crime

**Sixteenth Report of
Session 2005–06**



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Session 2005–06**

*Report, together with formal minutes,
oral and written evidence*

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/pac>. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Session is at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Nick Wright (Clerk), Christine Randall (Committee Assistant), Emma Sawyer (Committee Assistant), Ronnie Jefferson (Secretary), and Luke Robinson (Media Officer).

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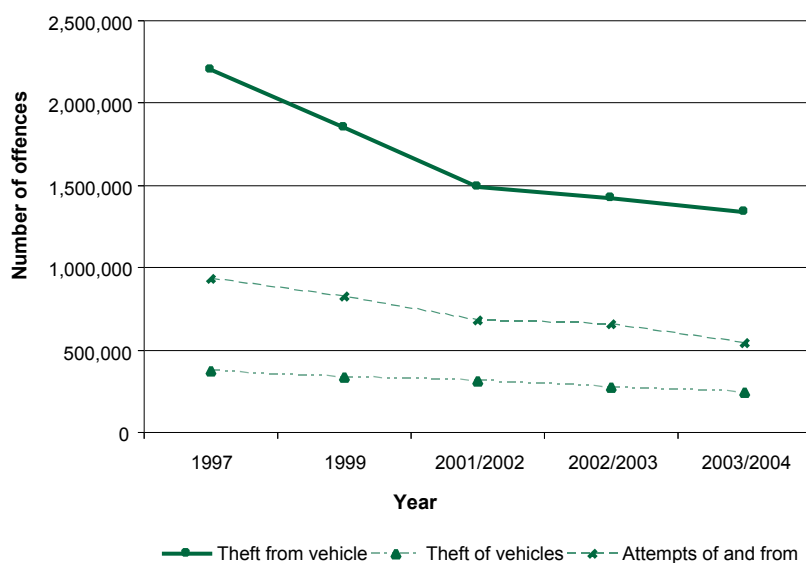
Contents

Report	<i>Page</i>
Summary	3
Conclusions and recommendations	5
1 Making vehicle crime more difficult	7
2 Improving detection	11
Formal minutes	15
Witnesses	16
List of written evidence	16
List of Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts Session 2005–06	17

Summary

The Home Office has reduced thefts of and from vehicles over the last five years working with representatives from the motor industry, police, and elsewhere, and looks set to meet its target of a 30% reduction since 1999. The overall number of thefts of and from vehicles remained in excess of 2 million in 2003–04, however, (**Figure 1**), and there were a further 1.4 million cases of vehicles being vandalised. Such crimes can endanger life, as well as cause distress and inconvenience to motorists and owners.

Figure 1: The British Crime Survey shows a reduction in thefts (and attempted thefts) of vehicles and from vehicles



Technological advances in improving the security of new vehicles have gone some way to reducing opportunities for theft but some top selling models still remain attractive. Less well protected older vehicles are also more attractive to car thieves. The Department has developed guidance for car owners on basic measures to reduce the likelihood of theft of or from the vehicle, together with a Car Theft Index, showing vulnerability to car crime on a make and model basis.

Around 20% of car crime is estimated to take place in car parks. The take up of accreditation to the Association of Chief Police Officers' Safer Car Parking scheme has been slower than anticipated by the Department, with fewer than 7% of car parks in England and Wales joining the scheme by March 2004. Closed circuit television cameras, improved lighting and fencing can also reduce car park crime.

Some success has also been achieved through other measures such as DNA testing and the Automatic Number Plate Recognition System. Legislation has tightened access to number plates in England and Wales and similar legislation is planned in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Registration of motor salvage operators has made it easier for the police to inspect premises without a warrant and to check vehicle purchase and disposal records. The effectiveness of this measure has, however, been weakened by the failure of some 26% of local authorities to set up registers in their areas.

One way of inhibiting sales of stolen vehicles by criminals is to stop them stealing and using the identities of another similar vehicle.

On the basis of a Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General¹ our predecessors took evidence from the Accounting Officer at the Home Office for crime policing, counter-terrorism and delivery, and the Chief Executive of the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, on actions to make vehicle crime more difficult and to improve police detection rates.

1 C&AG's Report, *Reducing Vehicle Crime* (HC 183, Session 2004–05)

Conclusions and recommendations

- 1. The Home Office has worked in partnership with motor manufacturers, insurers, the police and others to reduce vehicle crime** through improving vehicle security, increasing public awareness of those makes and models most likely to be stolen, encouraging safer car parks and tackling prolific offenders. It should take steps to raise public awareness of its Car Theft Index and other data on the relative security of different makes and models of vehicles, perhaps by developing a Home Office rating standard which could be displayed prominently in car showrooms.
- 2. Limited progress has nevertheless been made in improving vehicle security, and some successful measures have had to be imposed on manufacturers through legislation, for example the European Union requirement for immobilisers to be fitted.** The Home Office will need to promote, with manufacturers, the development and installation of new vehicle security measures arising from technological advances, and be ready to require their adoption, or further improvements in vehicle security may be harder to achieve.
- 3. The Home Office has no separate data on the incidence of carjacking and similar serious car crime incidents, although such crimes may increase as vehicle security improves.** It should collect such data from across the country to enable the police and Police Standards Unit to develop strategies for tackling such crimes.
- 4. Approximately 20% of all vehicle crime takes place in car parks, but only some 1,350 of the estimated 20,000 car parks in England and Wales have joined the Association of Chief Police Officers' Safer Car Parking Scheme.** The response amongst hospital and station car park operators is particularly disappointing. The Home Office should encourage police forces to publicise those car parks in their area complying with the scheme, and set a target and timetable for achieving greater take up.
- 5. Police detection rates for vehicle crimes are too low, with only 6% of thefts from vehicles and 13% of thefts of vehicles being resolved in 2003–04.** The public need to have confidence that the police treat such crimes seriously, and the Home Office should therefore work with the police to raise detection rates, for example through a review and dissemination of best practice from across police forces.
- 6. The introduction of Automatic Number Plate Recognition systems provides an opportunity to improve detection rates, but with wide variation across different police forces, from just over nine arrests per 100 hours of a Police Officer's time to less than one arrest.** The Home Office should work with the police to identify the factors which lead to the most effective use of the technology, and encourage their adoption across police forces.
- 7. If Automatic Number Plate Recognition systems are to help in the fight against vehicle crime, an accurate vehicle registration database is essential.** Currently there are some 950,000 vehicles which are not registered or taxed. Around 70,000 vehicles may have been cloned through use of someone else's number plate. The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency is undertaking a survey to verify the accuracy

of its database. Once the outcome is known the Agency should consider whether there are other means by which it could trace keepers of vehicles, for example by making use of electoral registers.

8. **The Home Office estimated that 10% of offenders committed 50% of all crime, and it has required its 370 Crime and Disorder Partnerships to identify and focus attention on the fifteen to twenty most prolific offenders in their area.** The Home Office should facilitate the sharing of good practice in designing and implementing projects to tackle vehicle crime between Partnerships.
9. **Attempts to tighten controls over the disposal of vehicles are being jeopardised by the failure of some local authorities to establish a register of motor salvage operators as required by the Motor Salvage Operators' Regulations 2000.** As well as working with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Local Government Association to secure compliance, the Home Office should consider a policy of naming and shaming those authorities which fail to take action.
10. **One way of inhibiting sales of stolen vehicles is to make it more difficult for criminals to disguise them by using the details of another similar vehicle.** The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency already checks a random selection of applications by the public for information on someone else's vehicle. The Agency should make it explicit on the relevant form that it is a criminal offence to unlawfully procure personal information, and that the Agency makes sample checks to verify that there is a reasonable cause to request such data.
11. **Unregistered motor salvage operators should be known to local authorities and the police and yet few prosecutions have been brought under the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001.** The Home Office should identify with the police and local authorities reasons for this outcome, and take action as appropriate.

1 Making vehicle crime more difficult

1. The Home Office looks set to meet its five year target of a 30% reduction in the number of thefts of and from vehicles since 1999 when the data to the end of 2004 becomes available in summer 2005. This likely success was based on data from the British Crime Survey, which the Home Office considered to be more accurate than police recorded crime statistics that suggested a lower reduction. The overall level of vehicle crime in England and Wales remains high, with an estimated 2.1 million thefts of and from vehicles based on the Home Office's British Crime Survey for 2003–04. Police records of vehicle crime indicated that the rates were particularly high in some areas of England and Wales (**Figure 2**). The Home Office Public Service Agreement target to reduce thefts of and from motor vehicles (including attempts) excluded cases of vandalism to vehicles, of which there were 1.4 million such incidents in 2003–04. Vandalism can also be distressing and inconvenient to the vehicle owner.²

2. The Home Office had worked closely with manufacturers and the insurance industry to improve vehicle security through features such as immobilisers, volumetric sensors and deadlocking being fitted as standard. Further progress will be dependent on manufacturers' commitment. The Home Office believed that for many customers security was as important as the look and performance of a vehicle. Newer cars were stolen less frequently than older cars, but not necessarily because of better security. Older cars tended to be parked on roads in areas which experienced higher crime levels overall. The Home Office did not believe there was a limit on the ability of manufacturers to make cars more secure as technology was always improving. The Department was, for example, encouraging the industry to adopt technology known as the Thatcham Category 5 which allows the engine of a stolen car to be immobilised automatically once it has stopped.³

3. The Home Office acknowledged that the government could decide to take powers to impose requirements on the industry but operating on a voluntary basis was the approach taken currently. This approach was proving successful in the Home Office's view as evidenced by the profile given to security and safety features in manufacturers' brochures.⁴

2 Qq 1, 8–12, 35, 36, 92–94

3 Qq 51–54

4 Qq 55–59

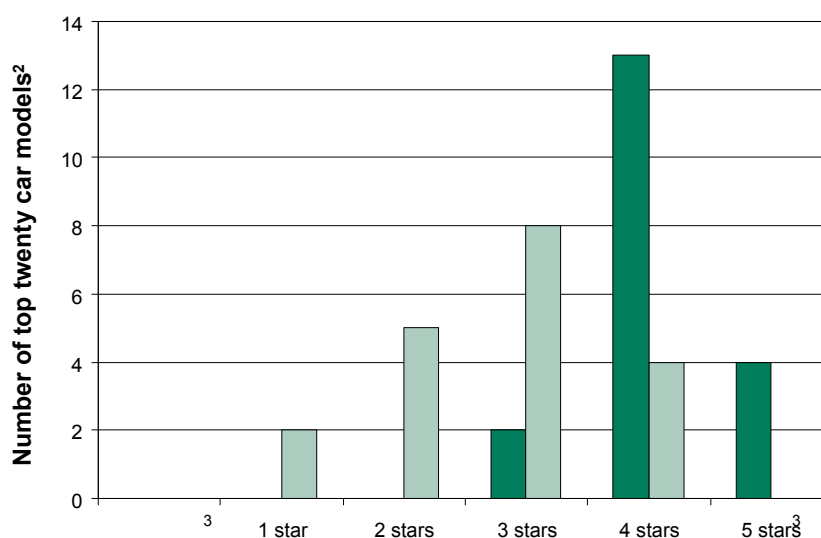
Figure 2: Thefts of and from vehicles per 1,000 population in 2003–04 by police force

Police force area	Thefts of and from vehicles per 1,000 population in 2003/04	Rating
Nottinghamshire	28	red
West Yorkshire	27	red
Humberside	25	red
Greater Manchester	24	red
Cleveland	23	red
South Yorkshire	23	red
South Wales	23	red
West Midlands	22	red
Metropolitan & City of London	22	red
Northamptonshire	20	red
Avon & Somerset	19	amber
Merseyside	19	amber
Bedfordshire	18	amber
Thames Valley	17	amber
Gwent	16	amber
Hertfordshire	16	amber
Leicestershire	15	amber
Derbyshire	15	amber
Cambridgeshire	15	amber
Gloucestershire	15	amber
Warwickshire	14	amber
Staffordshire	13	amber
Northumbria	13	amber
Cheshire	13	amber
Essex	13	amber
North Yorkshire	13	amber
Sussex	13	amber
Dorset	12	amber
Kent	12	amber
Durham	12	amber
Lancashire	12	amber
Hampshire	12	amber
North Wales	11	amber
Norfolk	10	green
Devon & Cornwall	10	green
West Mercia	10	green
Lincolnshire	10	green
Surrey	9	green
Wiltshire	9	green
Suffolk	9	green
Cumbria	8	green
Dyfed-Powys	5	green

4. The Home Office agreed that further work was needed to make the public and industry aware of the relative levels of car security on different forms of vehicle. Some cars are more vulnerable to being broken into, and some best selling models were targeted by criminals more frequently than others (**Figure 3**). The Home Office had developed a Car Theft Index based on data from the Driver Vehicle Licensing Agency and others on the makes and models of car most likely to appear as a victim of theft. This index was on the Home Office

website and available through local police forces. The industry, working in co-operation with the Home Office, had developed a new car security rating. And in 2004, the Department had introduced the British Insurance Car Security awards for the most secure cars in each of ten classes with an overall award for the safest manufacturer.⁵ The Home Office agreed to consider whether there was scope to enhance public awareness of the risk of theft by requiring a Home Office security rating, based on the Car Theft Index, to be displayed on showroom models.⁶

Figure 3: A summary of the Thatcham vehicle security assessments for the twenty top selling makes of car in the United Kingdom in 2003–04



The Thatcham star assessment of security (the higher the number of stars the better the security of the vehicle against criminals)¹

- The assessed likelihood of an offender being able to steal a vehicle
- The assessed likelihood of an offender being able to break into a vehicle

Notes: ¹ The security ratings are derived from research and testing by the Motor Insurance Repair Research Centre (Thatcham). There are a number of different specifications available for each model of car which have been assessed by Thatcham. As a consequence, we have used a modal average for each model of vehicle.

² No assessments were available for the Renault Clio. The other top twenty cars were the Ford Focus, Vauxhall Corsa, Peugeot 206, Vauxhall Astra, Ford Fiesta, Renault Megane, Volkswagen Golf, Ford Mondeo, Peugeot 307, BMW 3 series, Vauxhall Vectra, Ford Ka, Vauxhall Zafira, Nissan Micra, Fiat Punto, Volkswagen Polo, Citroen Zara, Mini, Toyota Yaris.

³ The four models of car scoring 5 stars were the BMW 3 series, Renault Megane, Volkswagen Golf and the Vauxhall Vectra. The two models of car scoring only one star for security against thefts from the vehicle were the Peugeot 206 and the Fiat Punto.

Source: National Audit Office analysis of data from the Thatcham website (www.thatcham.org) and the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders

5 Qq 1, 103–104

6 Qq 106–110

5. As new cars have become more difficult to break into, criminals have resorted to burglary or robbery to steal car keys, breaking into homes or confronting motorists in or near their cars to steal the keys and therefore the car. The Home Office was concerned about such crimes but did not have separate statistics on the incidence of carjacking. It was likely to be small in absolute terms, and the Home Office would need to consider the practicality of defining such crimes, and collecting data about them.⁷

6. Criminals can use the identity of another similar vehicle to hide any evidence that the vehicle they are selling has been stolen. As a consequence, the Driver Vehicle Licensing Agency has a responsibility to keep information on its Vehicle Register secure and only to disclose details if someone can demonstrate 'reasonable cause'.⁸ The Agency typically receives around 2,000 such requests a year, and a random selection are followed up by contacting insurance companies and the police to verify that the person does have 'reasonable cause.' Nevertheless, there is a risk that some cases continue to slip through the process.⁹

7. An estimated 20% of all car crime takes place in car parks. Yet across England and Wales there were just 132 secure car parks available at hospitals and 125 at railway stations. There are 20,000 or so car parks in England and Wales but only 1,350 car parks belonged to the Association of Chief Police Officers' Safer Car Parking Scheme at March 2004. The Home Office's target had been 2,000 participants by March 2000. The Home Office agreed more intensive action was needed for National Health Service and station car parks. The Department of Transport's Rail Group and the British Transport police were both engaging with operating companies, and the National Health Service security management service had been established recently. The Department also needed the support of colleagues in the relevant Government Departments.¹⁰

8. The Government's preference was for partnership working to improve car park security. It had, however, made clear in April 2004, that in the absence of real progress, all options would be considered to encourage the industry to deliver improvements in safety. Legislation was one option if it could be shown to deliver crime reduction benefits in a cost effective way. The original Safer Car Parks Scheme had been rigid, specifying precise features which might be relevant in big inner city car parks but not necessarily in a small local car park. A more flexible scheme had been introduced under which the appropriate measures were determined following an analysis of risk.¹¹

7 Qq 3-4

8 The term 'reasonable cause' is not defined in the Road Vehicles (Registration and Licensing) Regulations 2002, but typically includes cases where someone is trying to identify a driver who damaged their vehicle, or who persistently obstructs access to their property.

9 Qq 43-50

10 Qq 2, 19, 89

11 Qq 20, 89-90, 101

2 Improving detection

9. Detection rates for vehicle crime are low and lag behind those for all crime recorded by the police (9% against 23% overall). Only 6% of thefts from vehicles and 13% of thefts of vehicles were resolved in 2003–04, which might suggest the police gave relatively low priority to vehicle crime. The Home Office agreed that detection rates were too low, with priority having been given to reducing the overall number of vehicle crimes. It nevertheless believed that the police were determined to tackle such crimes, and did take them seriously. Vehicle crime was not the easiest crime to detect, for example when a lock had been forced, or a brick put through a window. There was, however, scope to improve, by for example making use of the National Intelligence Model and new technologies. Where members of the public invested in security features such as tracker devices, the police would assist if their car was stolen. And crime reduction projects funded partly by the Home Office could reduce crime. The Autolock project on an estate in Luton had incentivised people to fit steering wheel locks to their cars.¹²

10. In September 2004, the Home Office established its Prolific Offenders and Other Priority Offenders strategy to focus on the 5,000 to 7,500 offenders thought to be responsible for around 8% to 9% of all crime. The Home Office estimated that 10% of offenders committed 50% of all crime. The 370 Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships in England and Wales had been required to identify the 15 to 20 most prolific offenders and focus attention on them.

11. Where a car had been broken into, many police forces were beginning to use DNA technology, whereby DNA traces on say, a cigarette or drinks could be compared to the DNA of the 2 million people on the DNA database. By using other relatively new technologies, such as the Automatic Number Plate Recognition system, the police could compare vehicle number plates captured by video cameras to the Police National Computer and Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency records, as well as to local intelligence data. Interception and arrest rates by the 23 police forces piloting the Automatic Number Plate Recognition system varied considerably (**Figure 4**), in part due to the numbers of Police Officers involved and time spent travelling to the targeted area.¹³

12. Few stoppages arising from use of the Automatic Number Plate Recognition system result in arrests. Of the 28 million number plates scanned, 1.1 million were identified as vehicles of interest. Only around 100,000, however, were stopped and 13,000 people were arrested. The Home Office attributed this outcome partly to the learning curve needed to use the technology to best effect, and to the practicality of following up every vehicle identified. The Police Standards Unit was working to provide guidelines on how to exploit the technology to best effect. Nevertheless, based on current data, the technology appears to utilise significant amounts of police time with relatively few arrests arising.¹⁴

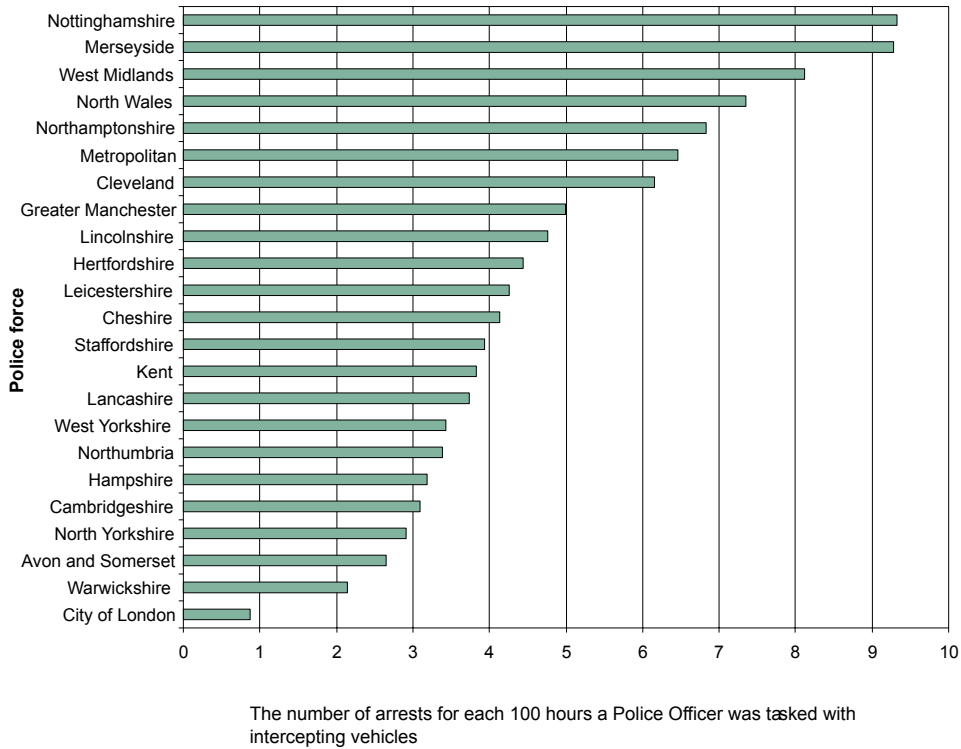
12 Qq 5, 60, 64–68, 94–95

13 Qq 5, 13, 61

14 Qq 13–14, 39–42, 115

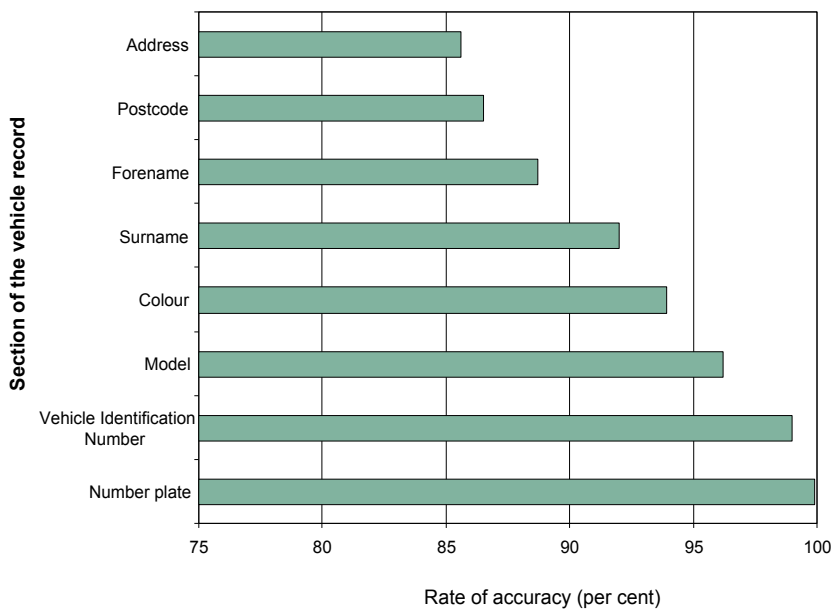
13. Inaccuracies in the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency's driver and vehicle databases have hindered police efforts to tackle vehicle crime (**Figure 5**). The Agency estimated that there were some 950,000 vehicles in use for which its data was not up to date and which have been unlicensed for more than 3 months. Around 70,000 vehicles were not on the Agency's database at all. To meet its target to halve the number of unregistered vehicles by 2007, the Agency had introduced continuous registration, established a computer link with the insurance industry to identify vehicles written off, and conducted a major data cleansing exercise in May 2005.¹⁵

Figure 4: Pilot Automatic Number Plate Recognition system arrest rates



Source: National Audit Office analysis of data from PA Consulting Group

Figure 5: A significant minority of Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency records are inaccurate



Source: Operational Research Unit, Department for Transport

14. Restricting access to number plates had reduced vehicle crime. Number plate security could nevertheless be tightened further, and measures under consideration included embedding computer chips in number plates so that authorities could verify that the plates were genuine, and making number plates physically more difficult to remove. The theft of number plates was relatively uncommon. Each month, however, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency issued between 10 and 20 new replacement registration numbers where there was evidence that the details of a vehicle had been stolen to clone other vehicles. Under the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001, which came into force in September 2003, all number plate suppliers in England and Wales must register with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and verify vehicle ownership records before issuing a number plate. The requirement to register had not yet been extended to Scotland and Northern Ireland, although action to do so was in hand.

15. Statutory regulation of motor salvage operators was introduced in October 2002. Regulations make it more difficult for criminals to dispose of stolen vehicles by replacing the vehicle's true identity with that of a legitimate vehicle or by breaking up the vehicle for spares. Under the Motor Salvage Operators' Regulations 2002, every local authority in England and Wales is required to establish a register of motor salvage operators so that the police can inspect registered premises without a warrant and take action against operators who do not register or who do not maintain appropriate records of purchases and disposals.¹⁶

16. The Home Office acknowledged that there were some local authorities which had yet to put in place a register of motor salvage dealers but it was working with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Local Government Association to make the regulations more universally applied. Not everyone who should be registered was registered, but they ought to be known to local authorities and local police forces. 26% of the 200 local authorities with the highest vehicle crime rates had no register but the Home Office planned to survey local authorities in May 2005 to check progress.¹⁷

17. The Home Office agreed that if the police and local authorities were aware of unregistered operators, prosecutions ought to have been brought. Provisional data for 2003 indicated, however, that there had been only four proceedings in total in Magistrates' Courts under the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001, of which one had led to a conviction. The Home Office had no data as to whether such proceedings related to motor salvage operators.¹⁸

16 Qq 97-99

17 Qq 21-23, 34, 97-100

18 Qq 97-99

Formal minutes

Wednesday 16 November 2005

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon
Greg Clark
Mr Ian Davidson
Helen Goodman

Sarah McCarthy-Fry
Jon Trickett
Kitty Ussher
Mr Alan Williams

Draft Report (Home Office: Reducing vehicle crime), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 17 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Sixteenth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned until Monday 21 November at 4.30 pm

Witnesses

Wednesday 9 February 2005

Page

Mr Leigh Lewis CB, Home Office, and **Mr Clive Bennett**, Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA)

Ev 1

List of written evidence

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

Ev 15

Home Office

Ev 15

List of Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts Session 2005–06

First Report	Managing National Lottery Distribution Fund balances	HC 408
Second Report	The regeneration of the Millennium Dome and associated land	HC 409 (<i>Cm 6689</i>)
Third Report	Ministry of Defence: Major Projects Report 2004	HC 410
Fourth Report	Fraud and error in benefit expenditure	HC 411
Fifth Report	Inland Revenue: Tax Credits and deleted tax cases	HC 412 (<i>Cm 6689</i>)
Sixth Report	Department of Trade and Industry: Renewable energy	HC 413 (<i>Cm 6689</i>)
Seventh Report	The use of operating theatres in the Northern Ireland Health and Personal Social Services	HC 414
Eighth Report	Navan Centre	HC 415
Ninth Report	Foot and Mouth Disease: applying the lessons	HC 563
Tenth Report	Jobskills	HC 564
Eleventh Report	Local Management of Schools	HC 565
Twelfth Report	Helping those in financial hardship: the running of the Social Fund	HC 601
Thirteenth Report	The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister: Tackling homelessness	HC 653
Fourteenth Report	Energywatch and Postwatch	HC 654
Fifteenth Report	HM Customs and Excise Standard Report 2003–04	HC 695
Sixteenth Report	Home Office: Reducing vehicle crime	HC 696

The reference number of the Treasury Minute to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number