

Questions and Answers about ANPR systems

What is Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR)?

ANPR devices work by scanning vehicle registrations and checking them against information stored in databases, including the Police National Computer to identify vehicles of interest to the police, such as stolen cars, those involved in crimes or vulnerable missing persons. When a suspicious vehicle is recognised it can be the focus of targeted interception and enquiries.

How does the technology work?

ANPR is an established technology that reads vehicle number plates via cameras using optical character recognition software. The technology captures images to identify number plates, compensates for plate orientation and skew and then uses optical character recognition software to read the VRM from the vehicle's number plate. ANPR systems can use images from dedicated fixed cameras which are primarily in vehicles or fixed sites, or existing video cameras which have been modified such as town centre closed circuit television (CCTV) cameras.

The ANPR systems compare the ANPR 'reads' against the Police National Computer (PNC) and other databases (such as those from the DVLA) and when a match is made the officer monitoring the system receives an alert which details the nature of police interest in that vehicle. The officer will then determine the most appropriate course of action to be taken, which may be initiated through an intercept of the suspect vehicle in real time, or just a note of the event which may be used to build a case at a later date.

Why is ANPR used?

Since their introduction in the 1980s for counter terrorism purposes in Northern Ireland, ANPR systems have been shown to be an extremely powerful policing tool in addressing crime at all levels, including serious and organised crime. Many criminals rely on vehicles to commit crime, and ANPR is designed through speedy access to criminal intelligence databases, to make it difficult for the criminal fraternity to use vehicles for illegal purposes without being detected.

How is ANPR data used?

ANPR technology, coupled with immediate follow up Police action via dedicated intercept teams and vehicles, can 'target criminals through their use of the roads'. ANPR is a very effective operational policing tool which allows the police to target known offenders, leading to Officers engaged on ANPR operations arresting up to 5 times the number of offenders that patrol officers would normally catch in a year.

What are the capabilities of ANPR in terms of weather conditions, speed, etc?

ANPR can read license or number plates on vehicles at speeds up to 100 mph (160km/h), regardless of weather or lighting conditions by utilising Infra Red illuminators and tailored cameras to capture the reflection from a number plate. Heavy rain and snow can cause a slight reduction in capability.

Who is ANPR used by?

Every Police Force in England and Wales has an ANPR capability and this intelligence led policing tool is fast becoming a core policing activity.

What is it being used for?

ANPR is an invaluable tool in the campaign to make our communities safer. There is an ambitious programme of crime reduction measures, harnessing the powers of this technology to drive down crime. By targeting criminals through their use of the roads the police will be better able to enforce the law, prevent crime and detect offenders and at the same time, increase casualty reduction by removing unsafe vehicles

and drivers from our roads, particularly those uninsured vehicles or those known to be being driven illegally.

In general terms, the aim of ANPR is to:

- reduce crime and disorder
- increase detection rates and the likelihood of positive criminal justice outcomes
- deter terrorism
- promote public reassurance
- enhance intelligence
- improve road safety.

What types of cameras are and will be used by ANPR?

The ANPR cameras currently feeding data into the police network are police-owned or run in partnership between the police and local authorities. In Dorset they include Mobile (patrol cars), Transportable (Specialist van or boxed systems etc.), ANPR fed through some town centre CCTV systems and Fixed Site systems to cover key points on the strategic road network or specialist areas such as ports and airports.

How many number plates are 'read' each day?

With ¾ million vehicles registered at the DVLA in Dorset, most of which will move at least twice a day, plus all the delivery and transiting vehicles which use our roads, there are estimated to be over 1.75million vehicle movements a day in Dorset, of which Dorset Police currently read around 23% almost entirely on main roads.

How many ANPR cameras are there?

Dorset is a relatively small force, and therefore currently possesses only 18 vehicle based systems and 14 roadside sites.

How accurate is the technology?

The police operator verifies all outputs from the ANPR system before any action is taken. Great care is taken over the accuracy, currency and validity of any vehicle registration number stored on the system.

POLICING GENERALLY

Won't this take police away from work they should be doing, like catching murderers and rapists?

Far from taking police away from catching criminals, ANPR is a very effective policing tool that can be used in the detection of criminals and crime reduction in general, with murderers and rapists having their vehicles placed on ANPR databases. It is also known that motoring offences are often associated with individuals who are often linked to other crime. Experience has shown that stopping vehicles where a motoring offence has been committed has often led to arrests for more serious offences. ANPR has become a valuable tool in fighting crime generally and will target criminals through their use of the roads.

Isn't this going to take 'bobbies' off the beat?

No. The policing of our streets are not adversely affected by the use of ANPR. High visibility policing is enhanced by ANPR operations, and the overt nature of ANPR operations and the associated policing activity is generally welcomed. Indeed its use leads to increased crime detection and arrests.

Won't street crime increase if the police focus on motoring offences?

Whilst ANPR uses the car number plate as an identifier, there is no specific focus on motoring offences other than dangerous or drug or drink drivers who pose a risk to the public. It is an intelligence-led approach that leads to persons of interest to the police being highlighted and allows officers to focus on

them. There is no evidence to suggest that usage of ANPR leads to an increase in street crime. In terms of the deployment of police resources, ANPR will not divert the police from their priorities. Use of ANPR so far has led to the arrest and conviction of criminals for a wide range of serious and volume crime offences.

How is this going to help Police fight crime?

Experience with ANPR has revealed very strong links between the illegal use of motor vehicles on the road and criminality. The wider usage of ANPR has led to the arrest and conviction of criminals for offences other than those motoring offences for which they have been stopped. This is a valuable tool in the fighting of crime more generally.

POLICING THE ROADS

Isn't this just another attack on the poor motorist?

Vehicles will only be stopped where records suggest that some form of road traffic or criminal offence has been committed, or there is a known police interest, and these will be prioritised and allocated within known Police resources. With ANPR, law-abiding citizens are much less likely to be stopped by the police.

Law-abiding motorists need have no fear that they will be targeted by the police as they will be allowed to use the roads unhindered, whilst the use of ANPR will help to remove more of the types of driver who may be responsible for crashes or injuries on the roads by targeting Drug drivers, Drink drivers or Illegal drivers.

Isn't this an unfair burden on the motorist, how can it be justified?

No. The development of ANPR has helped with the enforcement of road tax, no insurance, no MoT etc as well as tackling other more serious offences. It will have no impact on the vast majority of motorists who use their vehicles lawfully on our roads, pay their vehicle taxes and insurance and are law-abiding.

Won't this lead to police chases and endanger innocent drivers?

As always, the safety of road users, the motorist and intercepting officers will be of primary concern. Units will be located where it is possible for the police to intercept vehicles without undue risk to motorists in general. In ANPR operations, safe stopping techniques are used and can be a planned part of the operation, as opposed to chance sightings of offenders by patrol officers. There is no evidence to show any increased risk to the average road user as interceptions are very much business as usual.

The experience gained already allows best practice in the intercepting of vehicles to be employed. In general interception will be achieved without the need for any pursuit.

Is this another type of speed camera?

No, ANPR focuses on motoring and criminal offences NOT speed. The police do not deploy ANPR for the use of speed detection and there is no legislation which allows ANPR to be used in this way.

Where is ANPR used?

ANPR can be deployed on any road network.

How much does ANPR generate in income?

ANPR is not used as a cost recovery system. Fines generated from offenders for traffic offences are like other fines, paid back to the Treasury not Dorset Police.

Can it read foreign number plates?

Yes, systems designed for Police use can read reflective EU number plates and some non reflective European plates.

Is it your intention to have all streets in the UK covered by ANPR?

It would not be realistic or financially viable to have blanket coverage so that every road is equipped with ANPR nor would the Police wish to be so intrusive. The issues of having to manage all that data are carefully considered by the Information Commissioner and the Camera Commissioner who oversee the checks and balances required to ensure the Police look after the data carefully and to prevent the spread of cameras. Nationally it is intended to simply enhance coverage of the strategic road network and ports.

Will you be publishing where ANPR devices will be sited?

ANPR can be deployed on any road network however, the exact location of cameras would not usually be disclosed. This would defeat the purpose of the technology and criminals would avoid the areas plus many of these cameras form part of a national counter terrorism network. If motorists are abiding the law, they need have no concerns as to where the devices may be sited.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Isn't this the beginnings of a 'Big Brother' state?

Criminals and terrorists are becoming increasingly more sophisticated in their activities; therefore the police need to update their crime fighting capability. A bobby stood at the end of a road with a truncheon will not stop terrorists. The technology used simply alerts the police if there are legitimate concerns that the law has been broken and or a vehicle of interest to them has just passed a camera, it will do little more than that. ANPR allows the Police to focus on those who are engaged in unlawful activity. This means that people lawfully using our roads will do so unhindered by the police. There are very strict management processes in place to ensure that ANPR capture data is only used for legitimate policing purposes.

Doesn't this just give police the ability to spy on innocent members of the public?

No more than it gives any police officer any other ability to spy on people, something which is governed very tightly and legislated under the Regulatory Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA). Just a few percent of all the number plate records taken are ever looked at and then only when in connection with a criminal enquiry by a few trained people. Not every police officer has access to ANPR data. ANPR will only be used to target vehicles where records indicate that an offence has been committed. The technology does no more than check the number plate against records and alert the police where there is cause for concern. There are strict guidelines which have been published and available to everyone on the use of ANPR, and those provide the necessary safeguards to prevent abuse of this technology.

This is just Government spying on the people, isn't it?

No. This is simply a tool for identifying vehicles where a road traffic offence has been committed or where criminal activity is suspected. It does not have any other functionality. ANPR cameras are not capable of being moved around or zoomed in to look at people or houses etc, they simply look down at a section of the road and read number plates. The quality of images and the way in which Infra Red cameras work and the way cameras are set up, results in very few ANPR reads which show images the occupants of a vehicle, this is very rare and is not what ANPR is designed to do.

It is misleading to believe that every journey is logged. Police do not have the resources or funds to put cameras on every road and the storage of such vast amounts of data would be unrealistic in both management and cost. No one has access to any ANPR data unless there is a policing requirement. Law-abiding road-users have nothing to fear. Across the UK Police seize thousands of vehicles every month with no insurance, valid driving licence or MoT thereby making the roads safer for all of us. Dorset police usually seize around 1000 vehicles per year primarily from disqualified, uninsured or unlicensed motorists, again making our roads safer for all of us.

How can we be sure that innocent motorists will not have their details recorded or will not be stopped?

ANPR acts as a search tool of the number plates it has scanned. It is only where a vehicle is of interest to the police because a motoring offence is noted, or there is other known criminal activity associated with it, that a vehicle would be stopped.

DATA PROTECTION/FREEDOM OF INFORMATION/HUMAN RIGHTS

Will motorists be able to see the information held on them by the police?

Dorset Police are registered with the Information Commissioners Office as authorised to hold and manage public and Police data in accordance with current data protection principles, laws and guidance, and as such data protection law will apply to any records associated with ANPR the same as any other policing activity. However, data gathered for policing purposes is not usually given up to members of the public except in specific circumstances.

How long can ANPR data be retained?

The current Information Commissioners Office Guidelines on the Police Use of ANPR, drawn up in consultation with the ACPO data protection office and the Camera Commissioner, states that ANPR read data is available to those officers and staff with ANPR access for up to 90 days, after which a senior officer is required to authorise access, while the retention of any images captured is set to a one year limit. The actual record that the vehicle passed a camera is only held for two years after which it is destroyed. We have set this limit to ensure that such images are retained only for as long as they might be needed to resolve an investigation and no longer. If information is kept for longer, then there has to be a valid and legal reason to do so such as part of an ongoing major criminal investigation which requires a senior officer to authorise.

How will the police know who to stop?

ANPR will assist the police in identifying road traffic offences and other offences through a search of database records. It will only be those cases where the database indicates that an offence has been committed or suspected that the police would look to stop a vehicle.

It operates in virtually real time. In seconds, a police officer at the side of the road will get an indication of whether that vehicle is matched against information on PNC or other key databases such as DVLA no Tax data, No Insurance or, a criminal database indicating activity such as burglary or theft.

It is important to stress that ANPR only identifies vehicles, it does not identify people. The fact that a vehicle is seen in a particular place or time does not mean that a particular person was there. It very much depends on police officers carrying out an on-the-spot investigation.

How do I know that my car details aren't on a hot list?

There has to be valid reason for any vehicle ending up on a hotlist and it has to meet a number of specific criteria associated with the management of police intelligence. Likewise, PNC has clear guidelines on what information should go on there, who should stay on there, who authorises it and how the information is used, and it is the same with local hotlists which are used for local crime issues, e.g. ASBOs, anti-social behaviour, suspected shoplifters, scrap and metal thieves, drink drivers etc. The problem with local databases is that when a vehicle travels outside the area, it can become invisible which is why police forces are urged to use PNC for crimes which fit the appropriate criteria.

Will a permanent record be kept when someone is stopped, if so for how long and where?

There are strict ACPO guidelines on the Police use of ANPR and those provide the necessary safeguards to prevent abuse of this technology. In certain high profile investigations the police will value the ability to prove that a vehicle was in a specific area at a given time. There is provision within the technology to

record this. Such records would only be kept in accordance with the Data Protection Act and the ACPO ANPR Guidelines which have been fully published.

Does ANPR Infringe my Human Rights?

No, ANPR in fact enhances the Human Rights of law abiding citizens by providing additional security through assisting the police to target only criminals and terrorists. ANPR also enhances the freedom of movement of law abiding citizens by only targeting the criminal and leaving persons using the roads lawfully to travel unhindered by the police.

Who has access to ANPR data collected by the police?

The Home Office is leading on the implementation of ANPR across the country with the assistance of a number of partners including the Department for Transport and the DVLA, however access to ANPR data collection is restricted to authorised personnel within the Police Service only for criminal and terrorism purposes.

Will information from the database be available to local authorities?

Not in Dorset however, in some areas of the country CCTV systems which are operated in partnership between the Police and Local Authorities have been augmented with an ANPR capability. Within these partnerships, police data will only be accessed by the police, not Local Authority personnel. Local Police storage of ANPR data will soon all be centralised at the request of the Information Commissioners Office, with a planned National ANPR Data Storage system being procured which will do away with the need for Police Forces to each hold their own data dump. Not only will this simplify data storage making it much more secure but, will make significant savings for each force.

Are there any downsides to ANPR?

Yes, regrettably ANPR is often too clever for the police to keep up with. Around 1 vehicle in 50 will trigger an alert on ANPR although most will be for minor misdemeanours such as No Tax or No keeper registered at the DVLA. While it would be good to stop all of these vehicles in an ideal world, the reality is that resources often do not meet demand and there may not be a suitable police unit nearby and so, these ANPR alerts have to be prioritised with those which may endanger life and limb taking priority, criminal activity second and others last. As Police Officers are usually very busy, their other work has to be considered when looking to allocate an ANPR alert to an officer out on the streets. Many vehicles will therefore pass ANPR cameras and trigger alerts but may not be stopped as a result however, their movements may be used later to prove a criminal case or assist with an investigation.