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Tackling abandoned and untaxed vehicles: an evaluation of Operation Cubit

Jessica Jacobson, Tonia Davison and Roger Tarling

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Foreword

Operation Cubit was established in Kent as a multi-agency scheme for dealing with abandoned and untaxed vehicles (AUVs). In Kent, as elsewhere in England and Wales, AUVs give rise to a wide range of problems and the numbers of vehicles being abandoned is increasing. This report presents the findings of an evaluation of two pilot Cubit operations.

Operation Cubit brought together the key agencies that have powers in relation to AUVs – the police, the local authorities, and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). The main aim of Cubit was to use these agencies' powers in combination to remove AUVs quickly and efficiently from the streets and other areas. The pilots also aimed to disrupt criminal activity associated with the use of untaxed vehicles. Other supplementary aims included encouraging the voluntary re-licensing of vehicles and discouraging the abandonment of vehicles.

The report describes, in the first instance, the causes and consequences of AUVs and their impact on the community. It goes on to describe, in detail, the operation and the results of the pilots including the associated economic costs and benefits. The report concludes with a consideration of the feasibility of introducing a more extensive scheme. It also discusses the role of current legislation relating to vehicle licensing.

The report recommends the introduction of a more streamlined version of Operation Cubit and an investigation into the reinvestment of some of the income derived from induced re-licensing. The report also suggests reforms to the current licensing and registration systems that could help to link the identity of the keeper and the licensed vehicle.

Carole F Willis
Head of Policing and Reducing Crime Unit

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Operation Cubit

Operation Cubit is a multi-agency scheme for dealing with abandoned and untaxed vehicles (AUVs) which was introduced in Kent in 2001. This report presents the findings of an evaluation of two pilot Cubit operations. The first of these was an eight-week operation in Medway: a densely populated unitary local authority area which encompasses several towns. This operation ran from 22 January 2001 to 16 March 2001. The second pilot was a four-week operation in the town of Swanley and its surrounding rural areas, located within the district council area of Sevenoaks. The Swanley Cubit operated from 11 June 2001 to 6 July 2001.

Cubit was regarded by the statutory authorities in Kent as a practical and robust method of dealing with the wide range of problems associated with AUVs. In Kent, as across Britain as a whole, the number of vehicles that are abandoned on public highways and elsewhere has increased rapidly in recent years: increased costs of legitimately disposing of unwanted vehicles is linked to this rise. Vehicles that are long-term untaxed but are still in use tend to be uninsured and have no MOT; according to police intelligence such vehicles may be linked with criminal activities and at the end of their useful life are likely to be illegally abandoned.

Cubit brought together the key agencies that have powers in relation to abandoned and/or untaxed vehicles: namely, the police, the local authorities, and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). The main aim of Cubit was to use these agencies' powers in combination to remove AUVs quickly and efficiently from the streets and other areas. The operation also had a number of supplementary aims:

- to disrupt criminality associated with the use of untaxed vehicles
- to encourage motorists to re-license their vehicles
- to discourage the abandonment of vehicles
- to improve the quality of life for local residents
- to reduce incidents of vehicle arson.

Under Cubit, AUVs were targeted by an operational team comprising a police constable, a local authority warden, and wheel-clamping and removal personnel from Sureway, the DVLA contractors. This team clamped and/or removed vehicles on public roads that appeared to be abandoned or were roadworthy but untaxed. In addition, apparently abandoned vehicles in communal car parks and on housing association land were also removed. Provisions were made for owners (able to prove ownership) to recover removed vehicles if they so wished. The DVLA undertook prosecutions for vehicle licence evasion and non-registration of disposal with respect to a proportion of the vehicles actioned under Cubit.

Results of Cubit

The main results of the Cubit operations were as follows:

- Both the Medway and Swanley Cubits were effective in removing from the streets and other areas large numbers of AUVs over a short period of time:
 - A total of 642 AUVs were removed during the eight-week Medway operation and an additional 102 were inspected by the operational team.
 - Over the four weeks of the Swanley pilot, 184 AUVs were removed, 26 were clamped and subsequently de-clamped prior to removal and the DVLA took action against a further 60 untaxed vehicles.
- Officers involved in both operations believed the operations had a beneficial effect, at least in the short term on community safety and the local environment, a perception shared by many of the local residents surveyed.
- According to DVLA estimates, the operations encouraged a total of 3,919 motorists in Kent to voluntarily re-license their vehicles between February and July 2001. Induced re-licensing improves the audit trail for vehicles encouraging motorists to take greater responsibility for their vehicles. In turn this leads to a greater number of insured and MOT'd vehicles on the road. It also improves the accuracy of the vehicle register which will assist the police in enforcing criminal and road traffic law:
 - Over £600,000 in additional revenue was generated for the Treasury.

-
- Operational costs were approximately £136,000 thereby showing clear cost effectiveness benefits.
 - Cubit was seen originally as having the potential to reduce the problem of vehicle arson by removing the vehicles most likely to be targeted for this type of vandalism. However, the results were mixed with incidents rising during the Medway pilot and dropping during the Swanley pilot. The impact of this type of scheme and the mechanisms needed to reduce vehicle arson need to be explored further.
 - The impact on criminal activity is not easy to define. Local police intelligence claimed that a number of vehicles associated with local crime or offenders were removed by the Medway and Swanley operations, indicating that there may be some crime prevention impacts associated with this type of operation. Cubit and similar schemes may provide police with another method of targeting persistent offenders. However, its impacts are most likely to be in terms of disruption rather than reductions and it should be used as part of a wider targeted crime reduction package.

Looking ahead

Extending Cubit

The Cubit pilots were successful in removing large numbers of AUVs, although their impact was limited by the short-term nature of the operations. It is, however, unrealistic to expect them to prevent motorists from abandoning vehicles or acquiring and using untaxed vehicles once the operations come to an end. Therefore there is a need for continuous action to reduce the problems associated with AUVs.

Despite the cost effectiveness of Cubit when measured against DVLA re-licensing revenue increases, this type of operation is resource-intensive. It is unlikely that in its present form Cubit, or similar schemes, could be sustained over time in a single small area, let alone across an entire county or region. The demands on staff time associated with implementing Cubit over an extended period could prove excessive for the relevant agencies. Action should therefore include:

- The Government investigating the possibilities of easing the financial burden on the operation's partners through either:
 - the reinvestment of some of the income derived from induced re-licensing

-
- the reinvestment of additional fine income generated by the operation (although this may involve relatively small amounts).
 - Considering developing a more streamlined version of Cubit:
 - This might involve employing three or four teams of contractors on a permanent basis to work across an entire county. These teams could operate in 'short bursts' in different areas of the county in turn – using the same procedures as the Cubit pilots to remove AUVs.
 - The police and local authorities would have to be involved in the development of targeted strategies and plans designed to maximise the impacts of specific short operations but, by using contractors, their operational involvement would be kept to a minimum.
 - Continuous action across the whole of a county would not be possible, therefore it would be crucial to introduce alongside it improved measures for tackling AUVs on an ongoing basis such as surrender schemes.

Changes to regulations and legislation

The reforms announced recently by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and the former Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions (DTLR, now Department for Transport) will go some way to easing the problem of abandoned vehicles. New measures for local authorities include:

- the power to remove vehicles abandoned on the street anywhere in England after 24 hours rather than the present seven days
- increased opportunities to work with DVLA to remove unlicensed cars
- the power to dispose more quickly of unlicensed vehicles removed under DVLA powers, after seven days rather than 35
- improvements in the ease of tracing and clarification of vehicle ownership.

In April 2002 the first part of the European Union End of Life Directive came into force. This Directive introduces tighter environmental standards for the disposal of vehicles and, over time, will affect procedures as the disposal of vehicles becomes the responsibility of manufacturers.

Weaknesses in the current licensing and registration systems mean that the link between the identity of the individual keeper and his or her licensed vehicle is not soundly established and this may be one factor which is involved in the individual's decision to abandon their vehicle. Various issues relating to vehicle registration have been addressed by the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001 but the Act cannot be expected to have a major impact on licence evasion, the abandonment of vehicles and related matters. Hence the introduction of more extensive measures to formalise vehicle ownership are currently under consideration by the government. The Department for Transport has set up the Modernising Vehicle Registration Implementation Board which has the remit to take forward the recommendations of a report which considered the principles which should underlie effective vehicle registration and licensing.¹ Measures under consideration include, for example, the Dutch system, under which the seller and purchaser of a vehicle are required to register the change of ownership together at a Post Office. Another possible reform is to make the last registered keeper of a vehicle liable for any subsequent offences associated with that vehicle. Under such a system, the onus would fall on any individual who wishes to sell a vehicle to validate the identity of the buyer and ensure that he or she registers the acquisition.

¹ See The Jill Dando Institute for Crime Science (2002) "Crime Prevention and the UK Vehicle Registration and Licensing System" London: DTLR

Background

Operation Cubit was established in Kent as a multi-agency scheme for dealing with abandoned and untaxed vehicles (AUVs). In Kent, as elsewhere in England and Wales, AUVs give rise to a wide range of problems and the number of vehicles being abandoned in public areas is increasing. Not only are such vehicles unsightly but they can be dangerous and they can attract arson and vandalism. Vehicles that are long-term untaxed but are still in use tend to be uninsured and have no MOT; if such vehicles are then involved in criminal activity they prove difficult to trace as there is no obvious audit trail for them. Once their useful life has expired it is likely that they will be abandoned.

Cubit brought together the key agencies that have powers in relation to abandoned and/or untaxed vehicles: namely, the police, the local authorities, and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA). The main aim of Cubit was to use these agencies' powers in combination to remove AUVs quickly and efficiently from the streets and other areas. Provisions were made for owners (able to prove ownership) to recover removed vehicles, but the expectation was that the majority of vehicles would be destroyed – or 'cubed': hence the name of the operation. While the primary focus of Cubit was the removal of AUVs, there were a number of additional, broader objectives. These included encouraging the voluntary re-licensing of vehicles, discouraging vehicle abandonment and disrupting criminal activity.

Operation Cubit was piloted in two locations in Kent in the first half of 2001. The first pilot was an eight-week operation in Medway: a unitary local authority area covering several towns and which is co-terminus with the Medway policing area. The second was a four-week operation in the town of Swanley and its surrounding rural areas (located in Sevenoaks District Council). This is in the North Kent policing area.

Methodology

This report presents the findings of evaluations of the two pilot operations. The Medway evaluation involved a review of documentation and statistics relating to the operation, attendance at a seminar and local authority meeting on AUVs, and telephone interviews with members of the police, Medway Council and Kent County Council. This study was carried out retrospectively and within a short time-scale by a team from the Institute of Social Research, University of Surrey. Part of its purpose was to provide pointers for the more in-depth Swanley evaluation which followed it.

The Swanley evaluation, carried out by the Jill Dando Institute, University of London, provided the opportunity to observe the Cubit operation in process. The main elements of the study were:

- a review of operational documents
- collection and review of statistical data on AUVs from Kent police, Sevenoaks District Council, Kent County Council, the DVLA, Sureway (the contractor used for the removal and storage of vehicles) Kent Fire Brigade
- interviews with officers from all partner agencies: namely, Kent police, Sevenoaks District Council, Kent County Council, the DVLA, Sureways, Kent Fire Brigade, West Kent and Moat Housing Associations
- a short survey of residents, carried out by police special constables in the weeks immediately following the operation²
- observation of the operational team in action.

The findings of the two evaluations are presented together in this report, as the two pilot operations shared procedures, aims and objectives. Differences between the operations will be highlighted in this report. It should be noted that due to the more in-depth nature of the Swanley evaluation, this report contains more material from Swanley than from Medway.

The format of the rest of this report is as follows:

- Chapter 2 looks at the problems associated with AUVs and examines the scale of the problem of AUVs in Kent and current procedures for dealing with them.
- Chapters 3 to 5 deal with the details of Operation Cubit itself, its procedure, aims and objectives and the results of the pilots including the economic costs and benefits associated with the operation.
- Chapter 6 concludes the report with a consideration of the way forward focusing on the feasibility of introducing a more extensive Cubit scheme and also discusses the role of current legislation relating to vehicle licensing.

² The survey was administered in face-to-face interviews with 100 residents in streets across Swanley from which vehicles had been removed under the operation. The special constables contacted respondents by knocking on doors in the selected streets. The survey included questions about respondents' awareness of abandoned vehicles, the problems associated with abandoned vehicles, and their awareness and perceptions of Operation Cubit.

2.

Problems associated with abandoned and untaxed vehicles

Definitions

The term 'abandoned vehicle' is used in the context of this report to refer to a vehicle that is no longer put to any use, and has simply been left by its most recent keeper to become derelict and eventually, perhaps, vandalised or burnt out. Such a vehicle may have been abandoned on a public road or elsewhere. Abandoned vehicles typically are untaxed vehicles, since tax is unlikely to be paid on a vehicle for which no further use is envisaged.³

However, it does not follow from this that all long-term untaxed vehicles are abandoned: another category of nuisance vehicle is the untaxed, roadworthy vehicle. Cubit sought to deal simultaneously with both abandoned and untaxed roadworthy vehicles since there is a close relationship between the two: untaxed roadworthy vehicles are liable to become abandoned once they can no longer be driven. Officers from Kent Police have observed that a vehicle that has been abandoned by its owner may subsequently be picked up and used by another individual or individuals.

It is often not possible on the ground to make a clear distinction between the abandoned vehicle and the roadworthy untaxed vehicle. Officers involved in Cubit at both strategic and operational levels did not generally use this distinction. Nevertheless, for analytic purposes it is a useful distinction as it can help clarify the different kinds of problems associated with and causes of abandoned vehicles on the one hand and with roadworthy untaxed vehicles (for short-hand, referred to here simply as 'untaxed vehicles') on the other.

Abandoned vehicles

The number of vehicles being abandoned in Britain, according to Local Authority estimates, appears to have increased sharply in recent years. Based on Local Authority reports the number of vehicles abandoned in 2000 was 350,000 (DTLR, 2001). This number is estimated to have increased, according to a survey conducted by the London Borough of Camden, by as much as 750 per cent from 1998.⁴

³ According to a recent DTLR consultation document on abandoned vehicles, 'it is estimated that some 80 per cent of abandoned vehicles are unlicensed and have no current keeper on the vehicle record' (DTLR, 2001: 10).

⁴ Figure supplied by the Refuse Department of the London Borough of Camden, in telephone conversation.

Causes

The growing expense of legitimate disposal is implicated in this recent increase in numbers abandoned. The price of scrap metal has declined to such an extent (from £35 per tonne in 1998 to £10 per tonne in 2001) that scrap yards now charge for the disposal of vehicles whereas in previous years they would often collect and pay for old vehicles. The cost of disposal is set to rise further with the introduction of the European Union End of Life Directive, designed to ensure that vehicles are destroyed in an environmentally-friendly manner.

Another contributory factor for the rise in abandoned vehicles may be the increased stringency of MOT tests and the associated costs of keeping an older vehicle roadworthy. The market for second-hand car parts has also declined, which again may well boost the numbers of abandoned vehicles. In addition it should be noted that some vehicles are abandoned in order to defraud insurers or finance companies; others are abandoned having been stolen. Unlike most other European countries, Britain is facing the problem of a rapid rise in the numbers of abandoned vehicles. The fact that present British legislation relating to vehicle licensing and registration fails to establish a sound link between the identity of the individual keeper and his or her licensed vehicle may be implicated in this situation.

A possible consequence of this is that a sizeable minority of individuals fail to take full responsibility for their vehicles because of the perception, borne out by reality, that they cannot be called to account for them. While it is an offence to abandon a vehicle it is extremely rare that anyone is prosecuted for such an offence.⁵ In many cases, the authorities may be able to trace the last registered keeper of an abandoned vehicle but this individual can claim that the vehicle was sold on and that he or she is therefore not liable. In this situation it might be possible to prosecute for not registering disposal of a vehicle (that is, not informing the DVLA of the change in ownership), but even this will not always be applicable.⁶

5 Section 2.1 (a) of the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act states that it is an offence to:
abandon on any land in the open air, or on any other land forming part of a highway, a motor vehicle or anything which formed part of a motor vehicle and was removed from it in the course of dismantling the vehicle on the land.

The maximum penalty for this offence is a fine of £2,500 or three months' imprisonment, or both.

6 Prior to 1997, an individual selling a vehicle was only required to inform the DVLA of disposal. This still applies to those vehicles that were acquired before 1997 and have not changed hands since. Since 1997, however, there has been a requirement both to notify disposal and to give details of the new owner; however, these details will of course be incorrect if the new owner did not inform the seller of his or her true identity. Thus the situation may arise where the last registered keeper of a vehicle has followed the appropriate procedures in notifying the DVLA of disposal, but no accurate details of a current keeper are available.

Effects

Abandoned vehicles are eyesores and can cause much annoyance by blocking valuable parking spaces or by causing obstructions. Of respondents to the 2001 British Crime Survey (BCS), 18 per cent said that abandoned or burnt out cars were a very big or fairly big problem in their area.⁷ Such vehicles may 'encourage a piranha effect in which [they] are partially dismantled and stripped for parts, then commonly set alight' (Wyeth and Darge, 2002: 26). Zimbardo (1973: 88) observed this process in detail in New York City: as part of a social experiment a vehicle was deliberately abandoned on the street; after less than three days 'what remained was a battered, useless hulk of metal, the result of 23 incidents of destructive contact'.

'Dump sites' – areas of open land in which numbers of cars are abandoned – can cause pollution and become general rubbish tips. If there are many abandoned vehicles in a densely-populated neighbourhood, they can generate or heighten fear of crime, and add to a sense of general decay and deprivation. Abandoned vehicles may also encourage further littering and vandalism in an area – and, following the 'broken windows' thesis advanced by Wilson and Kelling (1982), may contribute to an environment in which disorderly behaviour of all kinds and ultimately more serious criminality becomes the norm.

Derelict abandoned vehicles can be dangerous due to broken glass, rusted metal and uncapped petrol tanks or because they often attract arson, putting local residents and fire service staff, as well as arsonists themselves, in danger. Kent Fire Brigade reports that a burning vehicle can reach temperatures in excess of 110°C and that burning vehicles can also, in addition to dangerous toxins and pollutants, produce projectiles of dangerous or burning material.

According to officers from local housing associations and Sevenoaks District Council, interviewed for the Cubit evaluation, if abandoned vehicles are not removed promptly they are extremely likely to be set alight by vandals within days or weeks. Indeed, arson was cited as the main source of concern for local residents, in relation to abandoned vehicles.

However, it should be noted that the precise relationship between the abandonment of vehicles and vehicle arson is difficult to assess. It is known that there has been a large increase in the numbers of malicious car fires in Great Britain in recent years (from 11,312 per annum in 1986 to 38,685 in 1996 – an increase of almost 250 per cent – according to the Arson Prevention Bureau, 1998). Officers from Kent Fire Brigade also expressed the

7 Special analyses of the BCS were undertaken for this project in order to shed light on the public's concern regarding abandoned vehicles. For more information about the 2001 BCS see "The 2001 British Crime Survey First Results England and Wales" Kershaw et al. Home Office Statistical Bulletin 18/01.

opinion that the increase in abandoned vehicles is one of the main causes of the rise in vehicle arson in Kent. Other factors that may be involved in vehicle arson include the concealment of crime (for example, when a stolen vehicle is burnt out in order to hide the evidence) and insurance fraud (Arson Prevention Bureau, 1998).⁸

The growing numbers of abandoned vehicles across Britain are a significant drain on police and local authority resources, and also – given that they attract arson – on fire brigade resources. (Some of the costs associated with abandoned vehicles in Kent will be discussed below.)

Untaxed vehicles

The proportion of untaxed vehicles on the roads in Britain is 2.4 per cent according to the DVLA roadside survey of 1999. (It should be noted that this figure includes motorcycles, of which a disproportionate number – around one-quarter – are untaxed.) This amounts to a total of about 1.5 million untaxed vehicles, meaning a loss of £183 million to the Treasury.

Causes

While there are indications of a slight decrease in the proportion of untaxed vehicles – the 1994 roadside survey showed a vehicle evasion rate of 3.1 per cent – it is clear that a minority of road users in Britain are not averse to motor tax evasion. Kent Police argue that the growing expense of insuring a vehicle, getting it through its MOT, combined with the expense of taxation itself can place legitimate car ownership out of the reach of many people on low incomes, including young people. With regards to young people the increased rigour of the driving test may be a further barrier to some of them becoming legitimate vehicle users. A recent report by the Automobile Association states that the practice of driving without having qualified to do so is 'becoming more socially acceptable, especially amongst young people' [1999: 17]. These factors coupled with the existence of social pressures and practical necessities for driving may, in some areas and circumstances, lead to a sub-culture of virtually unregulated vehicle ownership and use.

The expense of disposing of old vehicles responsibly means that car owners may be inclined to sell on their cars at very low cost to anyone interested in buying, without registering the transaction. In addition, some vehicles that have been abandoned and yet remain roadworthy may be picked up and used, and hence join the number of untaxed vehicles that are on the road.

⁸ The DTLR has recently commissioned research examining the relationship between vehicle arson, other vehicle crime, and the abandonment of vehicles.

Effects

The presence of untaxed vehicles on the roads itself brings a variety of problems including a considerable loss of revenue to the Treasury. If an untaxed vehicle is involved in a collision or crime there is likely to be no audit trail for the police to follow. Furthermore as unlicensed vehicles often have no MOT they are prone to being in poor condition. They are often also uninsured resulting in financial penalties for third parties involved in a collision with them.

Kent Police officers also argue that untaxed vehicles are frequently used for 'joy-riding', or used criminally as get-away cars or in 'bilking' (when petrol is stolen from garage forecourts). Other links with crime, according to Kent police, involve the possible use of untaxed vehicles as 'pool cars' by a number of criminals who access the vehicle as their needs arise, possibly abandoning or burning the vehicle after use.

Abandoned and untaxed vehicles in Kent

Procedures for dealing with abandoned vehicles in Kent

As elsewhere in Britain, in Kent the local authorities have primary responsibility for dealing with abandoned vehicles in their localities, under the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978. Under regulation 3 of the Act, a vehicle that is considered abandoned can be given a seven-day notice (if it is on a public road) or a 15-day notice (if it is on private land, and the authority has the permission of the land-owner). Within 24 hours of expiry of the notice, the vehicle can be removed and stored or destroyed. Kent has a two-tier system of local government, and it is the district councils that have responsibility for the 'noticing' of abandoned vehicles, whereas the County Council arranges the removal through contractors. Kent County Council also covers the costs of removal, storage and disposal.

In addition to the local authorities, Kent Police have powers to deal with abandoned vehicles under regulations 3 and 4 of the *Removal and Disposal of Vehicle Regulations 1986* (set up under the *Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984*). Regulation 3 gives the police the power to require the removal of a vehicle that:

- has broken down, or been permitted to remain at rest, on a road in such a position or in such condition or in such circumstances as to cause an obstruction to persons using the road or as likely to cause danger to such persons
- has been permitted to remain at rest or has broken down and remained at rest on a road in contravention of a prohibition or restriction contained in, or having effect under, any of the enactments mentioned in Schedule 1 to these Regulations.

Regulation 4 allows the police to remove a vehicle that:

- is a vehicle to which Regulation 3 of these Regulations applies
- having broken down on a road or any land in the open air, appears to a constable to have been abandoned without lawful authority
- has been permitted to remain at rest on a road or any land in the open air in such a position or in such a condition or in such circumstances as to appear to a constable to have been abandoned without lawful authority.

Both council officers and police officers in Kent are of the opinion that current procedures for tackling abandoned vehicles, developed at a time when the numbers were much lower than today, are inadequate. The fact that two tiers of local government and the police all play some part means that any lack of co-ordination between agencies can lead to vehicles falling through the net. In general the police are eager to minimise the numbers of abandoned vehicles that they remove on a routine basis on the grounds that these are formally the responsibility of the Council. In some cases however – for example if a vehicle can be said to be in a dangerous position or condition – the police may be expected to take action and are likely to be able to act more swiftly than the local authority.

The system of seven-day and 15-day noticing is considered by police and local authority officers to be highly inefficient and in some respects counter-productive as the placing of a notice on a vehicle can have the effect of attracting vandalism or arson. Many vehicles that are noticed cannot subsequently be removed, because they are moved a short distance in the intervening period. The DTLR reports that up to 40 per cent of cars...

‘reported as abandoned are reported on more than one occasion in different locations. It appears that cars are left by the roadside and only moved when they are reported and notice of removal is attached to the car. At this point they are moved to another location, where the process is repeated’ (DTLR, 2001: 4).

Another difficulty is that each vehicle must be visited several times prior to removal: for example, for an initial investigation, for the purpose of attaching the notice, and on expiry of the notice.⁹ The net effect of the rapidly rising numbers of abandoned vehicles and the apparent inefficiency of current procedures is that the authorities find themselves unable to respond to all reports of abandoned vehicles.

⁹ A study carried out in Sussex in 2001 found that, on average, 28 days passed between initial notification that a car was abandoned and its removal. The study also found many examples of multiple visits to vehicles by police, local authorities and the fire brigade (Wyeth and Darge, 2002).

Numbers and costs of abandoned vehicles in Kent

Table 2.1 shows the numbers of abandoned vehicles removed by Kent County Council over the past three years. Although these figures do not equate to the full number of such vehicles in the county (as the Council does not remove all of them, for reasons discussed above), they do illustrate the rapid growth of the problem. It can be seen that over these four years the number of vehicles removed has increased almost sevenfold.

The table also demonstrates the rising cost to the Council of dealing with abandoned vehicles: this has increased from £57,000 four years ago to £720,000 in the last financial year. For the year 2001 to 2002, the Council is budgeting for an estimated cost of £1million. (The increase in costs does not stem only from the rising numbers of vehicles dealt with, but also from the fact that the contractors who take the vehicles are no longer able to recoup a large part of their own costs from scrap metal dealers, because of the declining price of scrap metal.) It should be noted that the costs shown in Table 2.1 do not include the additional administrative costs to the Council associated with the removal of vehicles – which has been estimated by the Council at £55,000 for the year 2000 to 2001, leading to a total cost of £775,000.

Table 2.1: Abandoned vehicles removed by Kent County Council, 1997 to 2001

	1997/98	1998/99	1999/2000	2000/01
Numbers of abandoned vehicles removed by Kent County Council	1,472	3,232	8,239	9,848
Direct costs of removing vehicles incurred by Kent County Council	£57,000	Data not available	Data not available	£720,000

Accurate figures on the numbers of abandoned vehicles removed by the police cannot be obtained since records will also include vehicles removed on grounds of being in a dangerous condition or position. This problem with recording has increased since 2000 when officers were explicitly discouraged from taking responsibility for purely abandoned vehicles and so tended to reclassify abandoned vehicles in other terms. However, Table 2.2 presents data from the Kent Police Vehicle Recovery Scheme on the numbers of vehicles classified as 'abandoned' that were removed by the police from 1999 to 2001.

Table 2.2: Abandoned vehicles removed by Kent Police, 1999 to 2001

	1999	2000	Jan–May 2001 (5-month period)
Numbers of abandoned vehicles removed by Kent Police	2,193	2,601	994

Kent Police do not keep detailed records of reports received from the public about abandoned vehicles – most of which are referred to the local authorities. An indication of the number of public reports is provided by a survey of abandoned vehicle reports to the Kent Force Headquarters switchboard over the one-week period of Monday 2 October 2000 to Sunday 8 October 2000. The survey findings, which are presented in Table 2.3 broken down into the policing areas, show that a total of 716 reports were received across all areas over this week. (It should be noted that this number includes all reports – including different reports about the same vehicle.)

Table 2.3: Abandoned vehicle reports received by Kent Police Headquarters, 2nd October 2000 – 8th October 2000

Policing area	2.10.00	3.10.00	4.10.00	5.10.00	6.10.00	7.10.00	8.10.00	Total
North Kent	21	30	19	32	25	12	11	150
Medway	17	16	17	17	16	17	6	106
West Kent	12	21	8	17	18	7	4	87
Maidstone	6	17	11	15	17	1	12	79
S/East Kent	16	14	14	8	12	5	4	73
Swale	20	10	8	12	5	8	2	65
Thanet	10	10	12	10	15	3	3	63
Weald	6	11	6	8	8	5	7	51
Canterbury	12	5	6	6	4	5	4	42
Total	120	134	101	125	120	63	53	716

The Kent Fire Brigade is another agency that has direct involvement with abandoned vehicles through its attendance at car fires. In Kent in the year between April 2000 and March 2001, a total of 3,543 vehicle fires were attended by the Fire Brigade, which amounted to a loss of over 21,000 staff hours. Of these vehicle fires, a total of 2,730 were defined as malicious (compared with 2,202 malicious vehicle fires the previous year), leading to a loss of over 16,000 staff hours. A Home Office study estimates that the average total cost of the fire service response to a car fire (based on the average number of appliance-hours spent at an incident) is £880 (Weiner, 2001). According to this estimate, the total cost of the fire service response to the 2,730 malicious car fires in Kent in 2000–1 was £2.4 million.

Untaxed vehicles in Kent

The DVLA report that approximately 45,000, or 5.6 per cent, of the 808,000 vehicles in Kent are untaxed. This means a £5.5 million loss of revenue to the Treasury.

The DVLA has no formal responsibilities with regard to vehicles that are obviously abandoned; but untaxed, roadworthy vehicles on the public road fall within their jurisdiction. In general, an untaxed vehicle is dealt with through the completion of a CLE2/6 offence form. One part of the form is placed on the windscreen to notify the owner, while the other part is sent to the DVLA prosecution team in Maidstone, who follow up what is classified as an excise offence.

The DVLA also has the authority to clamp, remove, store and dispose of untaxed vehicles on a public road, under the *Vehicle Excise Duty (Immobilisation, Removal and Disposal of Vehicles) Regulations 1997*. According to these regulations, a vehicle that has been removed by the DVLA can be disposed of after five weeks, provided the name and address of the owner cannot be found or the owner has been informed of the vehicle's removal but has failed to recover it.

In addition to DVLA officers, police officers and traffic wardens have the authority to complete CLE2/6 forms with respect to untaxed vehicles. A DVLA prosecuting officer based in Maidstone, Kent, interviewed for the Cubit evaluation, reported that the numbers of CLE2/6s received from police officers and traffic wardens had decreased sharply over recent months. This was seen as reflecting the growing pressures on police time and the transfer of wardens from police to local authority control and consequent loss of experienced staff. To counter this the DVLA have sought to increase the time that they spend on proactive work. This includes 'road mapping', whereby specific localities are patrolled by DVLA officers on foot to identify parked vehicles that are untaxed and the use of road checks carried out in conjunction with the police.

The DVLA in Kent and Kent Police appear to have a strong working relationship and have co-operated closely on many operations. Both agencies share an interest in tackling the 'hard core' of the County's persistent licence offenders who, to date, have appeared resistant to licensing campaigns and initiatives. Operation Cubit provided an opportunity for the DVLA and the police to build on their working relationship by establishing a partnership which included the local authorities. This partnership dimension of Cubit proved to be highly effective and is discussed below.

Cubit procedure

In recognition of the growing problem of AUVs in Kent, a multi-agency working group was established to develop a more effective method of dealing with the problem. The group comprised representatives of Kent Police, Kent County Council, Medway Council and Kent Fire Brigade. Sureway, the DVLA's contractor, was also involved. The working group devised operational procedures that allowed the various powers and regulations relating to AUVs to be used in tandem providing a more holistic response to the problem than previously employed. A particular objective was to capitalise on DVLA powers with regard to the immediate removal of untaxed vehicles from public roads.

The Medway and Swanley Cubit pilots followed similar procedures. It will be described in terms of:

- the operational team
- the pre-targeting of vehicles undertaken by officers
- the categories of vehicle actioned
- the storage, disposal and recovery of vehicles.

The operational team

The operational team that implemented Cubit had the following members:

- a police liaison officer (a Police Constable)
- a local authority warden: in the case of the Medway pilot, from Medway Council; in the case of the Swanley pilot, from Sevenoaks District Council
- clamping and removal personnel (usually two of each, working with a single clamping van and two vehicle recovery trucks) from Sureway, to whom the DVLA had delegated its wheel-clamping powers.

The team worked only on weekdays during the operations, generally between the hours of 8.30 am and 5.30 pm. It operated as a single unit moving in convoy from one targeted vehicle to another. The police liaison officer was on occasion joined by a more senior officer and was supported by additional officers when there were concerns that the work of the team might provoke a public order problem. A DVLA prosecuting official from the Maidstone DVLA office also joined the team on some days of the operations in order to carry out additional checks on vehicles.

The pre-targeting of vehicles

Prior to the start of both operations, the police liaison officer and local authority warden gathered to pool their knowledge on the whereabouts of AUVs. In Medway, neighbourhood watch co-ordinators were also asked to identify vehicles for removal and in Swanley, a telephone number for reporting vehicles was provided in the publicity about the scheme. However, for the most part it appears that the pre targeting by officers – a process which continued over the course of the operation – played the most important part in identifying vehicles. The information gathered in this way was used to plan and direct the activities of the operational team on a daily basis.

The pre-targeting of vehicles also involved visits to off-street car parks, car parks in multiple occupancy areas and private land owned by housing associations, to locate abandoned vehicles. (The housing associations had given formal permission for action to be taken on their land under Cubit.) The officers prepared these areas for action by the Cubit team by displaying posters announcing that abandoned vehicles would be removed after a 15-day notice period (see below).

The vehicles actioned

The vehicles actioned under Cubit were classified in the following terms:

Category 1: Untaxed on a road and roadworthy

These vehicles were removed under DVLA regulations following a check with the DVLA that they were authorised for removal on the grounds of being untaxed. Under normal circumstances such a vehicle would be clamped for 24 hours prior to removal, however, if it is believed that the clamp may be tampered with, removal can be immediate. (In Swanley, following a threat from a member of the public to burn out any vehicle that was found clamped, almost all vehicles were removed immediately.)

Category 2: Untaxed, on a road, appears abandoned, but NOT a total wreck

These vehicles were also removed under DVLA regulations, again following DVLA authorisation. As with category 1 vehicles, they may have been clamped prior to removal. Following removal, these vehicles were determined as falling under local authority remit rather than that of the DVLA, as they were considered to be abandoned. This assessment was based on the local knowledge of the Police Constable and District Council warden (who were likely to know if a vehicle had not been moved over an extended period of time), and on the apparent state of repair of the vehicles – for example, if it looked like the wheels had not turned recently. The DVLA check would have already confirmed, in addition, that a given vehicle had no registered keeper.

Category 3: Untaxed, OFF road, appears abandoned, but NOT a total wreck

These vehicles were removed from car parks and housing association land. The DVLA has no authority to remove untaxed vehicles that are off the road; therefore such vehicles were removed under local authority powers, after checking with the DVLA that there was no Statutory Off-Road Notice (SORN) for the vehicle. As noted above, under normal procedures, the local authority must issue individual vehicles to be removed from private land with 15-day notices. Under Cubit, the posters displayed in the parking areas giving warning of action to be taken against all abandoned vehicles after 15 days – the ‘private land notices of intent’ – were intended to serve as 15-day notices. However, in practice, no vehicles were removed before the full 15-day period had passed.

Category 4: Untaxed, on or off road, appears abandoned and IS a total wreck

These vehicles were removed immediately under police powers to take vehicles that are in a dangerous condition. They included cars that had been burnt out.

There was occasional divergence from the practices outlined above. For example, if no authorisation for removal was forthcoming from the DVLA with respect to a category 2 vehicle, it could perhaps be removed under police rather than DVLA powers, on the grounds that it was in a dangerous condition. This flexible implementation of procedures was a key element of Cubit, allowing agencies working together to have immediate recourse to alternative actions.

Police checks were carried out by the police liaison officer with respect to every vehicle actioned, in order to establish whether it had been stolen or there were any other criminal associations with it. Each vehicle removed under Cubit was photographed by the local

authority warden 'in situ', to provide evidence that it lacked a valid tax disc, and to show its condition and whether it was on or off the road. In addition, the private land notice of intent was also photographed, if applicable.

The warden recorded all actions taken against vehicles in the vehicle recovery log. This included details of the vehicle location, the vehicle type and colour, the vehicle registration, the removal category and the date removed.

Storage, disposal and recovery of vehicles

Category 1 (untaxed and roadworthy) vehicles removed under Cubit were stored by Sureway for a minimum of 35 days, during which time the DVLA made enquiries of any current or last registered keeper. Any vehicle not recovered by the owner within the 35-day period could then be disposed of.

Vehicles that were deemed to be abandoned – that is, those that fell within categories 2 or 3 – were kept for a minimum of seven days before disposal. This served as the seven-day notice period that would have applied had the vehicle been removed by the local authority from the street. Category 4 vehicles – those that were total wrecks – were destroyed immediately.

For the most part, the last registered keeper (if there was one) of any category 2, 3 or 4 vehicle would not be informed of the vehicle's removal as a matter of course – as only category 1 vehicles were subject to keeper enquiries on a routine basis. Hence if any such vehicle had an owner, he or she would learn of its whereabouts only if he contacted the police or local authorities of his own account.

An owner who wished to recover a vehicle that had been clamped or removed to the car pound could do so on provision of proof of ownership. Additionally, the owner would have to produce a valid tax disc or pay a surety that could be reimbursed once the vehicle was taxed, and would have to pay a declamping fee or removal and storage fee.¹⁰

10 The fees levied by the DVLA were increased in April 2001 (under the Vehicle Excise Duty [Immobilisation, Removal and Disposal of Vehicles] [Amendment] Regulations). The current fees are:

Declamping fee: £80. (If a vehicle has been removed without being clamped, the declamping fee is all that needs to be paid if it is reclaimed within 24 hours.)

Recovery fee after 24 hours: £160.

Storage fee: £15 per day charged after initial 24 hours.

Surety (refundable if a tax disc is produced within 14 days): £120.

If a vehicle is removed from private land, the charges are levied by the local authority. These are £105 for removal, and £12 per day for storage.

Aims and objectives

As discussed in chapter 2, the issue of AUVs encompasses a range of inter-related problems and in response Cubit had a range of inter-related aims. These aims and their prioritisation varied between the agencies involved:

- the police (especially in Swanley) had a particular interest in the crime dimension
- the quality of life/environmental dimension was stressed by the local authority
- the DVLA had most interest in the re-licensing aspect of the operation
- the fire brigade were primarily concerned with the possibility of reducing arson.

Indeed, some of those involved in the operation felt that part of its potential strength lay in the fact that it brought together in partnership a range of agencies whose core business was affected, in different ways, by the issue of AUVs.

Six key aims were identified, with aims one and two being generally perceived by all partners to be at the heart of the operation:

1. To remove AUVs quickly and efficiently

Cubit aimed to deal quickly with both abandoned and untaxed vehicles, by utilising police, local authority and DVLA powers in combination. In particular the DVLA powers with regard to untaxed vehicles meant the operation avoided having to issue abandoned vehicles on public roads with seven-day notices.

2. To induce re-licensing

It was hoped that the presence of the Cubit teams, together with extensive local publicity about the operations, would have the effect of encouraging voluntary re-licensing of vehicles generating extra revenue for the Treasury. Other benefits included improving the audit trail for vehicles, encouraging more responsibility and accountability in the use of vehicles and ensuring that a higher proportion of vehicles on the road are insured and have passed their MOTs as these are requirements for re-licensing a vehicle.

3. To reduce the numbers of vehicles that are abandoned

The aim of encouraging the voluntary re-licensing of vehicles was directly linked to the longer-term aim of discouraging the abandonment of vehicles. It was felt that owners who license their vehicles are much less likely to abandon them because they feel that they are accountable for them. Furthermore, Cubit itself sought to hold some vehicle owners accountable – since the DVLA intended to prosecute some of the registered keepers (or last registered keepers) of vehicles removed for tax evasion or failure to register disposal. In the Swanley pilot, the police also aimed to prosecute some drivers for no insurance/MOT.

In Swanley, as part of the effort to discourage the abandonment of vehicles, a surrender scheme for vehicles was introduced shortly after the end of the Cubit operation. This provides a cheap and legitimate means of disposing of old vehicles. The scheme means that a legitimate owner can request Sevenoaks District Council to remove his or her vehicle for a £12 charge. Both the District Council and Kent County Council pay a further £12 each per vehicle to cover the cost of disposal.

4. To improve the quality of life for residents

Officers involved in both devising and implementing Cubit believed that there was a high level of concern and even anger among the general public about the numbers of abandoned vehicles in their neighbourhoods. One of the primary aims of Cubit was therefore to improve local environments in response to the residents' concerns.

5. To reduce car fires

As noted above, an associated problem of abandoned vehicles is that they can subsequently become the targets of arsonists. It was hoped that by removing abandoned vehicles from the streets there would be less opportunity for this kind of arson and a resultant decrease in the occurrence of car fires.

6. To disrupt criminal activity

Operation Cubit was seen as an opportunity to disrupt the possible links between crime and untaxed vehicles. The police hoped that Cubit might be a means of targeting and inconveniencing particular offenders although it was accepted that an impact on criminal activity was a likely happy consequence of the operation rather than a fundamental objective.

The pilots

Medway

The Medway Cubit was carried out for eight weeks, from 22 January 2001 to 16 March 2001. Medway, a unitary local authority area, has the densest urban population in the county and is the busiest policing area. Its total population is 242,000. Medway is situated on the North Kent border and covers the towns of Rainham, Gillingham, Chatham, Strood, Rochester and the Who Peninsula. It is bordered by the local authority districts of Swale, Maidstone and Gravesham.

The (unitary) local authority and policing area boundaries are co-terminus which assisted the planning and implementation of the pilot. The logistics of the operation were eased by the existence of a local car pound within Medway: namely, Limehouse Wharf.

Table 3.1 shows the number of abandoned vehicles investigated and removed by Medway Council over a two-year time period. It can be seen that the number of abandoned vehicles investigated in Medway increased by nearly 2,000 (or 66%) in two years, that is, from 2,924 (1998–1999) to 4,850 (1999 to 2000).

Table 3.1: Abandoned vehicles in Medway, 1998 to 2000

1998 to 1999			1999 to 2000		
Investigated	Removed (and as % of those investigated)*		Investigated	Removed (and as % of those investigated)*	
2,924	502	(17%)	4,850	1,555	(32%)

* Those vehicles that were investigated but not removed included vehicles that were subsequently found to be taxed or on private land, or to have been moved from their earlier location.

Swanley

The Swanley Cubit was a four-week operation, which ran from 11 June 2001 to 6 July 2001. Swanley is a town with a population of approximately 20,000, located in the north-west of the county of Kent and in the district council area of Sevenoaks. While this had not initially been intended, the Cubit operation extended into several mixed size villages situated close to the town and within Sevenoaks.

Swanley was identified as a suitable location for a pilot of Cubit partly because the numbers of abandoned vehicles in the town have been particularly high and rapidly increasing over recent years (see Table 3.2). From this table, it can be seen that the number of abandoned vehicles investigated by the District Council increased from 148 in 1998 to 1999 to 432 in 2000 to 2001.

For comparative purposes, the table also shows numbers of abandoned vehicles in the parish of Edenbridge, which has a population of a roughly equivalent size and socio-economic makeup to Swanley, and from the parish of Sevenoaks, which has a much larger population, but is generally a more prosperous area. In both Edenbridge and Sevenoaks there appear to be considerably fewer abandoned vehicles than in Swanley, although even in these areas there has been a significant increase from 2000 to 2001.

Table 3.2: Abandoned vehicles in Swanley/Hextable, Edenbridge and Sevenoaks

Parish	1998 to 1999		1999 to 2000		2000 to 2001	
	Investigated	Removed (%)*	Investigated	Removed (%)*	Investigated	Removed (%)*
Swanley/ Hextable	148	40 (27%)	255	90 (35%)	432	209 (48%)
Edenbridge	46	10 (22%)	63	21 (33%)	142	78 (55%)
Sevenoaks	51	6 (12%)	57	15 (26%)	218	111 (51%)

* As in Table 3.1, those vehicles that were investigated but not removed included vehicles that were subsequently found to be taxed or on private land, or to have been moved from their earlier location.

Residents of Swanley had strongly and frequently voiced their concerns about the high numbers of abandoned vehicles to the police, local authority, elected members and housing associations in the months prior to the launch of Cubit. At a public meeting held in April 2001 in St Mary's Ward to discuss crime and disorder, the subject of abandoned vehicles provoked more comment than any other – with residents complaining, in particular, about the failure of the authorities to remove vehicles before they were 'torched'. An officer from Sevenoaks District Council Community Development Unit reported that 'abandoned vehicles were the single issue people were most concerned about in Swanley'.

The residents' survey carried out as part of the evaluation of the Swanley Cubit found high levels of awareness of the problem of abandoned vehicles: 73 of the 100 respondents stated that they had noticed abandoned vehicles in their street over the past year and 85 had noticed them in Swanley as a whole. When asked the open-ended question: 'What kinds of problems do abandoned vehicles in this area cause for residents?', issues mentioned included the fact that abandoned vehicles are eyesores, can cause parking problems, and pose dangers to the public and particularly to children. (See Table 3.3 for the full range of comments made.)

Table 3.3: Swanley residents' perceptions of the problems associated with abandoned vehicles

Issues raised	Number of comments*
Eyesore/untidy/messy	33
Obstruction/parking problems/traffic problems	28
Danger to public/health hazard	28
Danger to children	25
Arson	19
Vandalism	12
Effect on house prices	6
Nuisance/trouble	5
Danger to property	4
Tax payers foot the bill	2
Attract the yobs	1
None/no opinion	6
Number of respondents	100

* respondents could make more than one comment

The residents' survey also revealed a certain level of public dissatisfaction with the way in which the authorities dealt with abandoned vehicles. Twenty-four respondents had in the past made a complaint about a vehicle, of whom 13 reported that they had received no response at all or had simply been referred on to another agency.

The police and local authority officers interviewed for this evaluation also believed Cubit could be a tool to tackle the problem of 'joy-riding' in the Swanley area. The issue of 'joy-riding' was raised by residents at the public meeting held in April, and it was emphasised that this was a matter of widespread concern in the publicity that accompanied the launch of the Swanley Cubit.

The Medway and Swanley pilots compared

In terms of implementation, there was little that distinguished the Medway from the Swanley pilot, besides the greater length of the former. One relatively minor practical difference, however, was that a single car pound – in Belvedere – was used for the storage of vehicles in the Swanley operation whereas in Medway all vehicles were temporarily housed locally at Limehouse Wharf, with category 1 vehicles subsequently being moved on to Belvedere for storage. (The Belvedere pound was used for category 1 vehicles from Medway as it had greater security than Limehouse Wharf and better facilities for dealing with owners who wished to recover their vehicles.)

Another point of contrast between the two pilots was that in Swanley there was an intention to carry out investigations of every vehicle that was burnt out during the operation. This investigative element was introduced into the operation as a response to an unexpected increase in car fires that occurred during the Medway pilot (to be discussed below). A second additional element in the Swanley operational plan was the proposal that the police should prosecute some of the drivers of the vehicles actioned for MOT and insurance offences.

Finally, while the police could be described as the lead agency in both pilots, in Swanley they appeared to play a greater part in directing the operation. This was because the police in Swanley were particularly keen to use Cubit as one method (among others) for disrupting the activities of a small number of known, prolific local offenders, who were believed to drive untaxed vehicles.

The results of the two Cubit pilots are discussed below in relation to the six aims of the operation as outlined in the previous section.

Remove AUVS quickly and efficiently

Numbers removed

In Medway, a total of 642 AUVs were removed over the course of the eight-week operation. Seventy-one per cent of these were category 2 vehicles (obviously abandoned vehicles on a public road). The shorter and more localised Swanley operation saw 184 vehicles removed over the four weeks, of which 49 per cent were category 2.¹¹ The full figures for vehicles removed in Medway and Swanley are presented in Table 4.1

Table 4.1: Vehicles removed in Medway and Swanley Cubits

Category of vehicle	Medway		Swanley	
	Number	%	Number	%
1: Untaxed roadworthy	44	7	33	18
2: Untaxed, abandoned, on public road	458	71	91	49
3: Untaxed, abandoned, off road	82	13	44	24
4: Untaxed, total wreck	58	9	16	9
Total	642	100	184	100
Daily average	16		9	

The officers involved in both operations expressed their satisfaction with the numbers of vehicles removed. Given the practicalities of loading and unloading times and travelling to pounds a maximum of 15 vehicles per day could usually be removed in Medway, and a maximum of 10 in Swanley. (The distances travelled for the Swanley Cubit were longer, since there was no local pound, equivalent to Limehouse Wharf in Medway.)

¹¹ It should be noted that it was not easy to acquire, for the purposes of the evaluation, the precise figures for numbers of vehicles actioned in Swanley – since there were some inconsistencies in the data held by the various agencies. The figures presented here were cross-checked and are believed to be accurate; but the difficulties faced by the evaluators in this regard point to a tendency for officers to overlook the importance of thorough and careful record-keeping.

The partners were satisfied that the Cubit procedure proved to be time efficient with the majority of vehicles being dealt with in a single team visit (two if the vehicle had first been clamped for 24 hours). This compares with the several visits typically paid to each vehicle removed under the 7/15-day noticing system.

The efficiency of Cubit, in terms of the vehicles removed, seems to have owed much to the strength of partnership working. As observed above, each partner agency had its own strong interest in the operation which was reflected in an operational plan with well co-ordinated action on the ground by the police.

Despite the large number of vehicles removed as a result of the Medway and Swanley Cubits' only a total of five complaints were received by the local authorities about vehicles that had been removed. In Medway, one of the complaints concerned a van that had been crushed by mistake, however it is anticipated that this issue will be resolved. The other complaints were from individuals who said that they would sue if their cars were not returned but officers feel they are unlikely to pursue the matter since their vehicles were not taxed making the complainants liable for prosecution. The two complaints in Swanley were made about vehicles that had been removed from housing association land. Both vehicles involved appeared to have been abandoned without Statutory Off-Road Notice and on pre-noticed land and are therefore likely to be dismissed.

The final point that should be made in relation to the numbers of vehicles removed under Cubit is that the higher percentage of category 1 (untaxed roadworthy) vehicles actioned in Swanley as compared to Medway seems to reflect the special emphasis placed by the Swanley police on tackling the use of long-term untaxed vehicles by local offenders.

Comparing Cubit with normal procedures

A comparison of the numbers of vehicles removed under Cubit with the numbers typically removed by the local authorities prior to Cubit supports the view that the operations achieved their aim of effective action against AUVs. In Medway during the financial year 2000/1, the Council removed an average of 26 abandoned vehicles per week. This compares with a weekly average of 80 vehicles removed under Cubit. The comparison is even more striking in Swanley. Here, the local authority removed an average of four vehicles per week in 2000/1, contrasting with a weekly average of 46 under Cubit. [It should be noted, however, that the Swanley Cubit extended beyond the boundaries of the parish of Swanley/Hextable.]

Even if the numbers of category 1 vehicles are subtracted from the Cubit totals for the purpose of this comparison (on the grounds that the local authorities deal only with obviously abandoned vehicles and not with roadworthy untaxed vehicles under normal procedures), the numbers removed by the operation remain impressive. In Medway, an average of 75 *abandoned* vehicles were dealt with per week; in Swanley, the figure was 38.

Tables 4.2 and 4.3 show the comparative figures for the Medway and Swanley Cubits, respectively.

Table 4.2: Comparison of vehicles removed by local authority with vehicles removed by Cubit: Medway

Vehicles removed by local authority: weekly average, 2000/1	Vehicles removed by Cubit: weekly average	Category 2-4 vehicles removed by Cubit: weekly average
26	80	75

Table 4.3: Comparison of vehicles removed by local authority with vehicles removed by Cubit: Swanley

Vehicles removed by local authority: weekly average, 2000/1	Vehicles removed by Cubit: weekly average	Category 2-4 vehicles removed by Cubit: weekly average
4	46	38

Additional vehicles actioned

In both Medway and Swanley, a number of vehicles had action taken against them in addition to those listed above. In Medway, the operational team inspected 102 vehicles that were not removed but some of these (number unknown) were clamped and then declamped on payment of a fee and a surety (or production of a valid tax disk). Additionally, during the Medway Cubit the normal local authority procedures for dealing with abandoned vehicles continued to operate, and the Council removed between 25 and 30 vehicles per week.

In Swanley, on top of the 184 vehicles that were taken to the Belvedere car pound, a further 26 were clamped and subsequently declamped prior to removal. Moreover, while Cubit was running, the DVLA took action against a further 60 untaxed vehicles that were issued

with CLE2/6 forms. This was as a result of road-mapping exercises in the town and a road-check that was mounted with the police in the last week of the operation. Actions of one kind or another were taken against a total of 270 vehicles. Given the relative small size of Swanley the local authority did not continue its regular actions with respect to abandoned vehicles while Cubit was in operation.

Recovery and disposal of vehicles

Details are not available on the recovery and disposal of vehicles removed by the Medway Cubit. In Swanley, it is known that 45 of the vehicles removed were subsequently recovered from the pound by their owners. One of these vehicles was picked up a second time by the Cubit team two weeks later as the owner had not licensed the vehicle within the 14 days allowed for by the surety payment.

All but one of the remaining 139 vehicles were destroyed after the appropriate storage periods and, with DVLA authorisation, one of the Cubit vehicles was released to auction (an auctioneer visits the car pound weekly seeking cars that appear to be worth at least £1,000 and are suitable to auction).

Displacement in Swanley

Despite the broad satisfaction with the overall numbers of vehicles removed under Cubit in Swanley, officers involved in the operation commented that they had not succeeded in taking action against as many vehicles within the town itself as they had hoped. They surmised that local press coverage prior to the pilot may have resulted in owners moving at-risk cars. As a result previously identified target vehicles were no longer on the streets when Cubit got under way. The police liaison officer reported that about 30 vehicles had been pre-targeted on two streets that the police associated with particularly high levels of crime and illegitimate vehicle use but only eight of these remained when the team came to the area in the first week of the operation.

Typically such vehicles had been moved to private land, including front gardens, that had not been pre-noticed with the operation's 'private land notices of intent'. It was also believed that some residents with targeted vehicles were moving their vehicles out of Swanley in the early mornings and returning them in the evenings in order to avoid the team. In an attempt to counter this the team made a 6am start one morning in the final week and succeeded in picking up four vehicles as a result. The police also believed that some vehicles were taken out of Swanley for the full duration of the operation, and were brought back into the town after it became known that the operation had ceased.

Because of the apparent displacement of vehicles from Swanley town, the Cubit team found that it was 'scratching around looking for vehicles', in the words of one of the Sureway staff. It was thus decided to extend their operations into the surrounding villages and rural areas within the boundaries of the North Kent policing area or Sevenoaks District Council.

The officers involved in the Swanley Cubit concluded that an element of surprise would have benefited their aims particularly the targeting of a number of persistent offenders. With hindsight they would not have used such advanced publicity although they were aware that publicity was important in prompting relatively more responsible individuals to re-license their vehicles.

Another lesson to be learnt from the displacement that occurred in Swanley is that in planning an operation it may be important to persuade private land-owners to allow action to be taken on their land, to reduce opportunities for moving vehicles out of the reach of Cubit. Similarly, there may be advantages to working with housing associations to establish what kinds of steps can be taken against residents who park AUVs in front gardens.

Induce re-licensing

The DVLA estimates the impact of a campaign such as Cubit by employing a standard methodology devised by statisticians at the (then) DETR. This involves examining the numbers of vehicle licences held in every police force area on a monthly basis. If an area has been subject to a campaign in a given month – such as Kent, in the months in which Cubit ran – any increase in licences held in the area over that month will be calculated by the DVLA. This change will then be compared with any change seen in all other areas which have not been subject to campaigns. It is expected that the campaign areas will show an increase in licences held when compared with other areas. The difference is calculated in order to estimate the number of licences that are induced as a result of the campaign. By applying average licence fee levels, the estimate of the revenue effects is then calculated.

Based on this calculation, the DVLA has concluded that the two pilots of Operation Cubit had a significant impact on licensing in Kent. Over the months of February to July, it is estimated that a total of 3,919 motorists in Kent voluntarily re-licensed their vehicles as a result of Cubit, generating £618,331 in additional revenue for the Treasury. (The main impact of the Medway operation was expected to be felt from 21st February, the date of the media launch; any lasting impact into June and July was then supplemented by the effects of the Swanley Cubit, publicised from the end of May.) As the total vehicle population in Kent is 808,224, according to these figures just under 0.5 per cent of vehicles in the county were re-licensed as a result of Cubit.

As no other campaigns on road tax were held in Kent in the relevant months, the DVLA is confident that the increased licensing in the county (relative to other areas) can largely be attributed to Cubit. They can not ascertain which precise aspects of Cubit had the greatest effect on re-licensing though.

Table 4.4 shows the figures for induced re-licensing in Kent broken down by month.

Table 4.4: Induced re-licensing of vehicles in Kent, February to July 2001

Month	Number of vehicles	Revenue generated
February 2001	477	£86,803
March 2001	1,114	£135,960
April 2001	331	£63,101
May 2001	348	£51,317
June 2001	1,255	£188,818
July 2001	394	£92,332
Total	3,919	£618,331

Discourage abandonment

Without undertaking a longer-term evaluation of the Cubit pilots, it is difficult to assess any lasting impact they might have had on the numbers of vehicles abandoned in Medway and Swanley. However, early signs from the sites are not encouraging in this regard. The police in both areas have reported that the numbers of abandoned vehicles on the streets have increased since the end of the operations, although precise figures are not available to confirm this.

Arguably it would be wrong to expect any kind of lasting impact from a time limited Cubit type operation for the following reasons:

- Firstly, even if a short-term operation is successful in terms of encouraging a sizeable number of motorists to re-license their vehicles, without ongoing robust action against untaxed vehicles there may be little change in the behaviour of individuals who in the past have persistently avoided licensing their vehicles and may be most inclined to abandon them when they can no longer use them. The evidence of displacement of untaxed vehicles in Swanley suggests that persistent licence evaders may need more prolonged inconvenience to persuade them to re-license their vehicles.

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- Secondly, over the life-time of a short-term Cubit operation, there is little scope for deterring drivers from abandoning vehicles through enforcement action. As stated above, it was the intention of the DVLA and police involved in the Swanley operation to prosecute registered keepers of vehicles for licensing, registration and/or MOT/insurance offences. The great demands on staff time associated with prosecutions however meant the scale of these prosecutions was limited and focussed on the roadworthy untaxed vehicle rather than the obviously abandoned vehicles.¹²
 - Thirdly, a short-term Cubit initiative will have no impact on the economic reasons that may be linked to vehicle abandonment. Subsidised surrender schemes may help on this front though. The Swanley surrender scheme was initiated on 1 September 2001 and it was not part of this evaluation to assess its overall effect but it is known that in the first two weeks 15 vehicles were surrendered. There is some scepticism about the impact of surrender schemes since they may in fact only assist and subsidise responsible vehicle owners who were unlikely to abandon their vehicles anyway. Because proof of ownership is needed the more persistent tax and licence evaders are less likely to subscribe to such a scheme.¹³

Improve quality of life

Officers from all agencies involved in the Medway and Swanley Cubits were confident that the operations had achieved their goal of improving the general environment for local residents – at least in the short term.

12 As of 10 September 2001, the 270 vehicles removed or otherwise actioned in Swanley had given rise to the following actions by the DVLA – all of which relate to licensing offences at this stage:

- 1 successful prosecution
- 20 prosecutions pending (i.e. the summonses have been printed)
- 18 out of court settlements
- 26 out of court settlements being pursued
- 26 cases under enquiry.

In a further 52 cases, some investigation was carried out but the cases were subsequently closed – for example because it was established that the vehicle was in fact licensed, or the offender could not be traced. In the remaining 127 cases, no steps were taken. As of 15 August 2001, a total of 15 police prosecutions for MOT and/or insurance offences were pending.

13 Within Kent, surrender schemes have operated in two other local authority districts in recent years: namely Thanet and Canterbury. The Thanet District Council scheme has been in operation since February 1999, and has resulted in 2,774 vehicles being surrendered. The Canterbury City Council scheme ran from April 2000 to May 2001, and 741 vehicles were surrendered. Under both these schemes, unlike in Swanley, vehicle owners are not required to contribute to the costs of removal.

In Medway, a survey of neighbourhood watch members was conducted by the police as part of their own evaluation of Cubit. This survey was distributed at a neighbourhood watch conference in March, about six weeks after the start of the Cubit pilot. Of the 90 respondents who returned the questionnaire, 76 (84%) knew about the operation, and 14 (16%) had seen it in action. Those who had seen it described it as quick and efficient. Sixty-eight respondents (76%) thought that it had had an impact on abandoned vehicles in Medway. The Medway Cubit also attracted a lot of local media coverage, and many positive comments from the general public. For example, one resident remarked to the operational team that Cubit was doing more for local people than initiatives against crimes such as burglary, as abandoned vehicles 'affect everyone going about their lawful business ... [They] are there for everyone, every day'.

The residents' survey carried out for the evaluation of the Swanley Cubit also showed a high level of awareness of the operation, and that it generally met with approval. Seventy of the 100 respondents said that they knew of the operation, of whom 33 said that vehicles had been removed from their own street. Fifty-two (or 74%) of those who knew of the operation were positive in their response to it, compared to six (or 9%) who suggested that it had had no or little effect. The positive comments included:

Brilliant!

A good idea.

Joy-riding is less because abandoned vehicles are not here.

In many cases, comments were added about the need for action against abandoned vehicles to be continued.

Comments about the initiative from members of the public (other than individuals whose cars were being removed) were recorded by the operational team as they worked. A total of 41 comments were noted, of which the only negative one was a suggestion that it was unfair to remove vehicles without first looking for their owners. Among the other remarks were the following:

Now I'm able to park my car.

It's good to see action being taken.

It's about time they were caught.

Serves him right – hope you do him again.

Nice and tidy again.

Thanks for cleaning up the village.

I've paid my tax – so should they.

There was further evidence of local support for Cubit at a public meeting on crime and disorder held in Swanley on 16 July after the end of the operation. It was noted at the meeting that the problem of 'joy-riding' seemed to have declined. (As mentioned above, police and local authority officers had hoped from the outset that the operation would impact on this particular problem.) However, it was also observed at the public meeting that the apparent decline in 'joy-riding' had been accompanied by an increase in the nuisance use of motorbikes.

Some public antagonism to the operation in Swanley was encountered. In one street, in which there were several AUVs a public order problem arose when, according to the police account of events, a crowd of 50 people gathered to watch as the owner of one of the vehicles that was being removed began to smash up their vehicle with a pick-axe. Some members of the crowd were hostile but the police presence in support of the Cubit team (in what was known to be a difficult area) led to an end to the trouble. However, even amongst this seemingly hostile group it was noted that several of the women shouted their support for the action being taken by the authorities – saying that 'joy-riding' in the area posed a real danger to local children.

Despite the limited trouble in Swanley, officers from the police and local authorities in both Medway and Swanley felt that one of the positive outcomes of Cubit was that it bolstered support for their agencies among the general public. The police in Swanley have sought to build on this by inviting residents to form new neighbourhood watch schemes, and by making an appeal for special constables to work in the town. However, three months after the end of the operation only one new neighbourhood watch scheme had been established in Swanley, and there is no evidence that this was linked to the operation.

Reduce car fires

The Medway and Swanley Cubits appear to have had opposite effects on vehicle arson. In Medway, there were 80 malicious car fires over the eight weeks of the operation, compared to 45 over the previous eight weeks. Various reasons for this increase have been suggested, but no definitive answer has been put forward. One explanation offered by the police is that some individuals who had been making use of untaxed vehicles wanted to destroy them before they were taken by the Cubit team – in the belief that they might be prosecuted for using the vehicles and/or that the authorities would otherwise benefit from selling the vehicles on. However, a Kent Fire Brigade report on the increase in arsons during Cubit concludes that the incidents were so mixed that it is impossible to determine whether the increase was due to the operation – particularly since the proportion of car fires that involved AUVs is not known.

As a result of the increase in car fires in Medway, the police and fire brigade proposed that they would carry out thorough investigations of all malicious car fires that occurred during the Swanley operation. However, in contrast to Medway, the number of car fires in Swanley dropped: over the four weeks of the operation there were only two, compared to a previous monthly average for the area of six, and six fires over the four weeks that followed the Swanley Cubit. The investigation of the two car fires during Cubit was limited to an unsuccessful attempt to trace the previous owners.

Officers involved in the Swanley Cubit are uncertain about the reasons for the drop in vehicle arson. The police have suggested that this may have resulted from their success in targeting, at an early stage of the operation, individuals who tended to use untaxed vehicles for criminal activity, including joy-riding, and would typically then burn them. Another possible explanation is that potential arsonists were deterred from setting fire to vehicles by the publicity about Cubit, which stressed that the police, DVLA and Sevenoaks District Council were jointly taking robust action on the streets against AUVs.

No clear conclusions can be reached from the results of the Medway and Swanley Cubits about the most likely impact of Cubit-type operations upon rates of vehicle arson. Some indications of the most effective means of addressing this problem may be provided by a new 12-week Cubit operation that was launched on 1 October in the local authority districts of Gravesham and Dartford. Kent Fire Brigade have taken the lead on this initiative because of their concerns about the rise in vehicle arson across the county. They expect that their sustained action against AUVs should eventually diminish the numbers of car fires by removing from the streets those vehicles that are most often set alight.¹⁴

Disrupt criminality

Associations with criminality

One indicator of Cubit's possible success in disrupting criminality is the number of vehicles removed under the operation that had associations with local crime or offenders.

In Medway 122, or just under 20 per cent, of the 642 vehicles removed under Cubit had some form of criminal interest shown on Genesis (the Kent Police crime reporting system, which includes intelligence on people and vehicles) – in terms of the vehicles' associations with individual offenders or with crime. Forty-one individuals described by the police as 'active and prominent nominals' (that is, known offenders) were owners of, or had access

¹⁴ The costs of the new Cubit are to be shared by the Fire Brigade (who acquired £30,000 for this purpose from the Arson Fund) and the police and the Gravesham and Dartford local authorities (who are to pay £10,000 apiece).

to, vehicles removed. The offences with which vehicles were associated included car crime, low level burglary, drug-related crime, bootlegging, and assaults during road rage incidents. Others had been used by disqualified drivers.

In Swanley, 18 of the 184 vehicles removed had clear links to offenders or to crime, according to police reports. No further details on these criminal associations are available, other than that two of the vehicles were suspected of involvement in drug-related crime. The police inspector who was the operational manager of the Swanley Cubit stated that the 18 vehicles definitely linked to criminality represented about one-third of vehicles 'strongly suspected' by the police of having criminal associations. Hence the police estimate that in total about 60, or 30 per cent, of all the vehicles removed in Swanley had connections with crime. It should also be noted that the problem of displacement in Swanley, discussed above, may have reduced the operation's impact on criminality.

As part of the effort to establish to what extent the vehicles removed by the Swanley Cubit had links with crime, the police organised searches of a number of the vehicles. Ten of the vehicles associated with known offenders were searched by a physical search team and the drugs dog; the only item found was a camera, but this was not identified as stolen. A further 20 randomly selected vehicles (among those held in the pound) were searched by the drugs dog, and again no drugs or stolen property were found. This was not a major surprise to the police, who felt it was unlikely that such items would be left in cars.

Impact on crime levels

While the police in both Medway and Swanley were confident that some disruption of criminality was an outcome of the Cubit pilots, they were of the opinion that this was likely to be on too small a scale to be reflected in overall crime figures for the respective areas. In Swanley, a limited analysis of crime levels over the Cubit period, carried out by the police, suggests that overall crime and vehicle-related crime actually rose during the operation and vehicle-related crime continued to rise in the month that followed. Police intelligence indicates that this upward trend in vehicle crime may be related to the return to the area of particular offenders known to the police.

It appears, therefore, that an operation such as Cubit is likely to have a relatively minor impact on crime levels, in comparison to other factors. In Swanley, the police evidently viewed Cubit as one of several tools that they could use in taking action against persistent local offenders. According to officers, one immediate effect of using Cubit in this way was the exacerbation of anti-police feeling within a small section of the local community. In this increasingly fraught context, the police were aiming to take further measures, including the use of surveillance, to tackle the criminal activities and antisocial behaviour of what are perceived as certain 'problem families'.

5.

Economic costs and benefits

Costs

The preceding chapter has shown that Operation Cubit in both Medway and Swanley achieved a great deal in terms of the numbers of AUVs that were removed from the streets and other places. As might be expected, the economic cost of this to the agencies involved was substantial.

Contracting costs

The basic cost of Cubit arises from the contracting of the Sureway team to clamp, remove, store and arrange the disposal of the vehicles. For the eight-week Medway operation, the total cost of contracting Sureway was £50,000, which was split evenly between the DVLA, the police, Medway Council, Kent County Council and Kent Fire Brigade.

The contracting cost for the Swanley operation (which was carried out over four rather than eight weeks and covered a smaller area than Medway) was £17,900. Again, this was divided between the main partners, with the exception of the DVLA in this case, and with additional contributions from Swanley Town Council, West Kent Housing Association and MOAT housing association. The contributions from the various Swanley agencies added up to £18,100; that is, slightly above the eventual cost (see Table 5.1).

Table 5.1: Contributions to Sureway contracts for Operation Cubit

Medway		Swanley	
Agency	Contribution	Agency	Contribution
DVLA	£10,000	Kent Police	£4,000
Kent Police	£10,000	Sevenoaks District Council	£6,000
Medway Council	£10,000	Kent County Council	£4,000
Kent County Council	£10,000	Kent Fire Brigade	£2,000
Kent Fire Brigade	£10,000	Swanley Town Council	£1,000
		West Kent Housing Assocn	£1,000
		MOAT Housing Assocn	£100
Total	£50,000	Total	£18,100

Staffing and other additional inputs

In addition to the contracting costs, the police and local authorities in Medway and Swanley were responsible for some extra direct expenses arising from Cubit and, more significantly, contributed a large amount of staff time to the operation. No staff were employed specifically to work on Cubit, but there were opportunity costs associated with the allocation of existing staff to the operation.

The major police and local authority contributions to the Swanley Cubit, in terms of staff time, are outlined in Table 5.2, below. This table clearly demonstrates that over the four weeks of Cubit's implementation, a considerable number of days were devoted to it by, in particular, the police inspector, police constables and Sevenoaks District Council warden.

Table 5.2: Police and local authority staffing inputs into the Swanley Cubit

Agency	Officer	Role	Days: pre-implementation period	Days: implementation period	Days: total
	Inspector	Operational manager	5	10	15
Kent Police	Sergeant	General support to operational team	-	5	5
	PCs	Police liaison officer on operational team; additional back-up for team	-	49.5	49.5
Sevenoaks District Council	Warden*	Pre-targeting vehicles; member of operational team	5	20	25
	Chief Executive; representatives from Community Development & Direct Services	Attended various planning and strategy meetings; general support to operational team	No specific information	No specific information	N/A

* The regular duties of the Sevenoaks District Council Warden include responding to reports of abandoned vehicles across the district, among other activities.

Kent Police and Sevenoaks District Council have provided estimates of the cost of these staffing inputs, and additional Cubit expenses, which are presented in Table 5.3. (Equivalent information on staffing inputs into the Medway Cubit and associated costs are not available.)

Table 5.3: Estimated staffing and additional costs of the Swanley Cubit

Agency	Item	Cost
Kent Police	Staff time	£13,660
	Use of vehicles	£320
	Refreshments	£110
	Camera and film	£160
<i>Sub-total</i>		£14,250
Sevenoaks District Council	Staff time	£3,250
	Printing (laminated notices) and stationery costs	£500
	Camera film	£110
	Bed & Breakfast for Sureway team (for night preceding 6am start)	£370
<i>Sub-total</i>		£4,230
Total		£18,480

Total costs

Table 5.4 gives some idea of the cost of the Swanley Cubit, including the contracting costs together with staffing and additional inputs from the statutory agencies. According to these data, the total cost was approximately £36,380; but it should be noted that the full cost of the operation was undoubtedly higher than this, since staff from other agencies also played a part in it. Kent County Council, for example, committed some staff time to the planning process (although the cost of this was described by a representative from the Council as minimal), as did Kent Fire Brigade. Staff from the DVLA also played a major part in the Swanley Cubit through contributing to planning meetings and, more significantly, in authorising removal of vehicles, carrying out the road checks and road-mapping associated with the operation and undertaking the prosecutions. However, since these activities are fully integrated within regular DVLA work, it has not been possible to identify the resultant additional costs to the organisation.

Other costs, which could not be measured, included the costs of accommodation and equipment (e.g. the use of the phone and stationery) and other overheads (e.g. training and advertising). The increase in prosecutions as a result of Cubit would have also led to

additional costs to DVLA and agencies of the criminal justice system. It should also be noted that further opportunity costs could be incurred with the re-direction of staff resources, as staff could not work on other projects while they were working on Cubit.

Table 5.4: Estimated cost of the Swanley Cubit

Item	Cost
Contracting Sureway team	£17,900
Police and Sevenoaks District Council staffing costs	£16,910
Additional Police and Sevenoaks District Council expenses	£1,570
Total	£36,380

An indication of the cost-effectiveness of Cubit can be gained from comparing the average cost of removing a vehicle under normal local authority procedures with the cost of removing a vehicle (which could be an abandoned or a roadworthy untaxed vehicle) under Cubit. If contracting costs only are taken into account, the average cost per vehicle under normal procedures is £73 compared to a cost of £82 under Cubit, as shown in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5: Comparative costs of removing vehicles under normal procedures and Cubit

Kent County Council, 2000-2001		Medway and Swanley Cubits	
Number of vehicles removed	9,848	Number of vehicles removed	826
Cost of contractors	£720,000	Cost of contractors	£67,900
Cost per vehicle	£73	Cost per vehicle	£82

The relative expense of Cubit, indicated by the figures in Table 5.5, is likely to be even higher if the associated staffing and other additional costs to the police and local authorities are taken into account. (As demonstrated above, for the Swanley Cubit these were roughly equivalent to the total contracting costs.) Of course, the removal of abandoned vehicles under normal local authority procedures also incurs additional costs: Kent County Council have estimated that for the year 2000/1 they faced additional administrative costs of £55,000. There is also a cost to the district councils, whose staff inspect and place notices on the vehicles that are removed, and to the police, who receive and refer to the local authorities reports of abandoned vehicles. However, these associated staffing and administrative costs cannot be equivalent to those arising from Cubit, given that the latter makes an especially high demand on staff time. In particular, the operational team – comprising at a minimum one local authority officer and one police officer in addition to four Sureway employees – is highly resource-intensive.

In one sense, Cubit can thus be described as an expensive operation. However, the costs of the Medway and Swanley pilots appear to have been far exceeded by the income generated for the Treasury – but not the partner agencies themselves – by the induced re-licensing that followed the operations.

Benefits

Induced re-licensing

Cubit had a significant impact on induced re-licensing which in turn improved the accuracy of the vehicle record. This is a very important factor, as the more accurate the vehicle record the more potential there is for improving enforcement of criminal and road traffic law via, for example, ANPR and camera technology.

As discussed in the previous chapter, it is estimated by the DVLA that the Medway and Swanley Cubits encouraged just under 4,000 motorists to re-license their vehicles from February to July 2001, generating almost £620,000 as additional revenue for the Treasury. This figure cannot be broken down to compare the effects of the Medway and the Swanley operations, since induced re-licensing is assessed by examining county-wide trends.

To estimate the net income produced by the two Cubit operations, it is necessary to subtract the costs of the operations from this figure of £620,000. The overall cost of the Swanley Cubit has been estimated, above, to be approximately £36,000 (excluding the cost to the DVLA). It is known that the contracting cost of the Medway Cubit was £50,000. If it is assumed that in Medway as in Swanley the additional (staffing and other) costs to the statutory agencies were roughly equivalent to the total contracting cost, this operation would have had a total cost of approximately £100,000. Taking these figures into account, the net income derived from the two operations was £484,000 – as shown in Table 5.6.

Table 5.6: Net income from Medway and Swanley Cubits (approximate)¹⁵

Income from induced re-licensing	£620,000
Cost of Swanley Cubit	£36,000
Cost of Medway Cubit	£100,000
Total costs	£136,000
Net income	£620,000 – £136,000 = £484,000

¹⁵ Both the estimated costs and benefits occur within the year, so no discounting or deflating is considered necessary.

As all the income generated by induced licensing goes to the Treasury rather than the agencies responsible for implementing Operation Cubit, it does not help to offset the expenses of the operation in a direct way. If a Cubit-type operation were to be introduced on a more extensive basis than in Medway and Swanley, it would be important to consider the possibility of re-directing a portion of the income to the partner agencies.

Additional income

Some additional income was also derived from the Cubit operations in the form of fees – namely, de-clamping, recovery and storage fees – paid by drivers who recovered their vehicles. In Swanley, this amounted to the considerable sum of £16,850. (The equivalent figure is not available for Medway.)

Also to be taken into account is the income from fines and back-duty paid by drivers prosecuted for excise offences. Again, no information on this is available from Medway; and information about Swanley prosecutions is incomplete, given that much of this work is ongoing. As of 10 September, actions with respect to vehicles removed or otherwise dealt with during the Swanley Cubit had produced:

- 18 out of court settlements with respect to which a total of £1,120 had been paid
- 1 successful prosecution, resulting in an £80 fine, and charges of £24.16 for back duty and £45 costs.

At this stage, a further 20 prosecutions were pending, as were ten out of court settlements; and 26 cases were still under enquiry.

Income derived from fees, out of court settlements, and the costs awarded in successful prosecutions (but not fines or back duty, which go to the Treasury) is retained by the DVLA.

Cubit may well have led to other, less easily quantifiable, benefits. By encouraging re-licensing, more cars will have been serviced, put through MOT inspections and insured. Benefits will thus accrue to garages and to insurance companies, not to mention the general public through more roadworthy and insured vehicles.

This report has demonstrated that the rapid rise in numbers of abandoned vehicles in Britain, and the continuing use of untaxed vehicles by a significant minority of drivers, are caused by various economic and social factors and, in turn, give rise to a range of problems. The need for an integrated, robust approach to tackle AUVs is therefore clear. The question that this final chapter of the report addresses is whether Cubit offers an approach that could and should be extended across the county of Kent and eventually, perhaps, nationwide.

Even if an extended Cubit-style operation is an appropriate method of diminishing the problems associated with AUVs in the medium term, it may be that in the longer term legislative change is required to tackle the problems at their root. Some of the issues relating to legislation are briefly considered in the latter part of this chapter.

The overall effectiveness of Cubit

Outcomes

The evidence presented above demonstrates that the Cubit operations in Medway and Swanley were highly effective in removing from the streets and other areas large numbers of AUVs over a short period of time. As a result, the operations had a beneficial effect on community safety and the local environment, at least in the short term – by removing vehicles which were or would have become derelict, and also taking off the streets roadworthy untaxed vehicles that, in the view of the police, were likely to be used irresponsibly or possibly for criminal purposes. It is also apparent that these benefits were recognised and appreciated by local people.

A further and significant outcome of Cubit and the publicity surrounding it was that, according to DVLA figures, it encouraged a large number of motorists in Kent to re-license their vehicles voluntarily. This will have generated income for the Treasury, but should also have brought other benefits: an improved audit trail for vehicles, a greater sense of responsibility among motorists, and more vehicles on the road with insurance and MOTs.

The impact of the Cubit operations on vehicle arson appears to have been mixed – since incidents rose during the Medway pilot and dropped during the Swanley pilot. It seems probable that Cubit has the potential to reduce vehicle arson, in that it removes from the streets vehicles that are likely to be vandalised and ultimately burnt out; but there is evidently a need to explore further the mechanisms for achieving this.

As with vehicle arson, the impact of Cubit on criminal activity is not easy to define; but since a number of vehicles associated with criminality were removed by the Medway and Swanley operations, Cubit does appear to have some value in this regard. Although any such disruption of criminality is unlikely to be on a large enough scale to be reflected in the overall crime figures for a given area, Cubit may offer the police one means of targeting persistent offenders that can be used in tandem with other measures.

Cubit's effectiveness in tackling AUVs was primarily due to its combined use of several agencies and sets of powers. Partnership is thus an intrinsic element of Cubit, and it seems that in both Medway and Swanley this aspect of the operations worked well. All officers interviewed for the evaluations reported that the working relationships between the partners were highly constructive, with the result that there was full co-operation and collaboration throughout the operations.

As noted above, the partnership seems to have been facilitated by the fact that Cubit had a direct bearing on the core business of each partner agency. More specifically, Cubit emerged from the police interest in disrupting criminality associated with the use of untaxed vehicles, and in improving the audit trail for vehicles; the DVLA interest in promoting vehicle licensing; the local authority interest in improving community safety and the physical environment by removing abandoned vehicles from public places; and the fire brigade interest in reducing vehicle arson.

Limitations

Notwithstanding the achievements of the Medway and Swanley Cubits, they both also had their limitations. The fundamental limitation is that they were short-term operations that, in the main, were likely to bring short-term benefits. In other words, it might have been anticipated that when these operations ceased, both abandoned and untaxed vehicles would return to the targeted areas, as would the problems associated with such vehicles. Police reports from Medway and Swanley suggest that this is indeed what has been happening in both areas.

The Cubit pilots were unlikely to have long-term effects on the numbers of AUVs in Medway and Swanley for the following reasons:

- While the operations removed abandoned vehicles from the streets and other areas, they did little to prevent or discourage individuals from abandoning their vehicles in the first place. This is because the economic imperative to abandon vehicles remained powerful; the risks of prosecution (for excise or

non-registration offences) with respect to abandoned vehicles were low during the operations and almost non-existent thereafter; and in the absence of sustained pressure to license vehicles, such vehicle owners could not be made to feel more responsible or accountable for their vehicles.

- Similarly, while the operations took untaxed vehicles away from – and in some cases prosecuted – the individuals who were using them, this did not prevent those individuals from acquiring and using (at low cost and with low risk of apprehension) untaxed vehicles in the future. Moreover, the displacement of untaxed vehicles, as apparently occurred in Swanley, lessened even the immediate impact of the operation on the users of these vehicles.

This indicates the need for ongoing action against AUVs and, most importantly, against those who can be held responsible for them.

If Cubit is to be introduced on a wider geographical scale it is therefore vital that the operation has the capacity to sustain some level of action over time. However, it is clear that due to its resource-intensive nature, Cubit in its current form could not operate on an ongoing basis – in a single small area, let alone across an entire county. Even if the financial burden on the operation's partners could be partially eased through reinvesting some of the income derived from induced re-licensing or through the reinvestment of additional fine income generated by the operation (although this would be on a small scale), the demands on staff time associated with implementing Cubit over an extended period would prove excessive for the relevant agencies.

It is therefore important to consider the possibility of introducing a more streamlined version of Cubit that could have a broad reach in terms of time-scale as well as geography. This option is already under consideration by some of the officers involved in the Medway and Swanley pilots, who recognise that this is the only practical means of taking Cubit forward on a wider scale.

An extended Cubit?

An extended but streamlined Cubit might of course take various forms. One possible approach would be to have three or four teams of contractors employed on a permanent basis to work across an entire county. These teams could operate in 'short bursts' in different areas of the county in turn – using the same procedures as the Cubit pilots to remove AUVs.

One of the advantages of such a scheme would be that while it would not involve continuous action in any given location, the operational teams could frequently return to any particularly problematic area and thus ensure that the pressure on irresponsible vehicle owners and users would be sustained.

Under such a scheme, the locations and timings of the short operations would be determined by local authority and police information on trouble-spots; and the precise nature of each intervention would depend on the nature of the local problem, as it was understood by these agencies. For example, if there were many abandoned vehicles on private land in one particular area, the operation in that area would have to be preceded by liaison with the land-owners and the pre-noticing of vehicles (which might most easily be carried out by the local authorities). The planning of the short operations would also take into account any perceived risks of displacement in particular areas.

The interventions would generally be accompanied by publicity, in order to maximise their effect. Again, however, the timing and nature of the publicity would vary, according to the particular problems that were being addressed. For example, if there was an intention to tackle a 'hot-spot' of long-term untaxed vehicles within a high crime area, the intervention would in all likelihood benefit from a surprise element, and thus publicity would follow rather than precede it. As argued above, the Swanley Cubit indicated that in some circumstances pre-publicity can dampen the effects of an operation.

The involvement of the DVLA in the proposed scheme could be broadly similar to their involvement in the Cubit pilots. As under the original Cubits, the DVLA could delegate the necessary powers to the contractors to clamp and/or remove vehicles, with authorisation provided by means of telephone requests or computer link to the DVLA database. As occurred during the Swanley Cubit, DVLA officers could supplement the work of the Cubit operational teams where appropriate, by carrying out road checks and road mapping in the same areas. The DVLA would also be expected to carry out prosecutions for licence and registration offences with respect to a proportion of vehicles removed under the scheme.

The extended Cubit scheme would ideally make far fewer demands on the time of police and local authority officers than the original Cubits. As outlined above, these agencies would necessarily be closely involved in the planning of the specific short operations; however, their operational involvement would be minimised if the contractors were able to work without a permanent police and local authority presence on the convoys. This would require the agencies to establish a method by which the contractors could be authorised to remove vehicles under local authority and police powers (that is, those vehicles that were

not removed under DVLA powers). A system by which police checks could be carried out on all vehicles removed would also have to be put in place – for example, by allowing the contractors remote access to certain kinds of information on vehicles held by the PNC.

The police would be expected to provide back-up for the contractors if they faced potential violence or public order problems when removing vehicles. Through their involvement in the planning of the operations, the police would be expected to have some insight into where and when this back-up might be required, and could provide staff accordingly. In particular areas, the police might want to work closely with the operational teams in an effort to use Cubit to disrupt the activities of persistent offenders. Under such circumstances, the police might also consider undertaking prosecutions with respect to vehicles removed for MOT and insurance offences.

Since an extended Cubit scheme of the kind described above would not entail continuous action across the whole of a county, it would be crucial to introduce alongside it improved measures for tackling AUVs on an ongoing basis. Surrender schemes for old vehicles, as are already operating in some local authority districts in Kent, would be one such measure that could operate in conjunction with a broader Cubit. DVLA licensing campaigns of various sorts could also help to reinforce the actions and message of the Cubit operations. Additionally, in some areas it may be possible to improve collaboration between the local authority and the police in dealing with abandoned vehicles, so as to avoid some of the problems typically associated with the system of seven-day and 15-day notices.¹⁶

In working out the details of an extended Cubit scheme, and additional measures that could be simultaneously introduced, it will be important to take into account any lessons to be learnt from other schemes for tackling AUVs that have been introduced in recent years. There are a variety of such initiatives in different parts of the country, some of which focus on abandoned vehicles, while others seek to encompass abandoned and also roadworthy, untaxed vehicles, as does Cubit. Some examples of such schemes are presented in Box 1.

¹⁶ In Swanley, for example, an attempt has been made by the police and local authorities to introduce a new joint scheme which, in the words of one of the police officers, would involve 'short-circuiting the seven-day notice'. Under this system, the police were to inform the local authority of vehicles that they deemed to be abandoned, and could be immediately removed under the police powers. The local authority would then have responsibility for removal, and would keep the vehicles for seven days before disposing of them. However, at the time of writing the details of the scheme have not been agreed, and it has not been introduced.

Box 1: *Other schemes for tackling abandoned and untaxed vehicles*

- **London Borough of Camden** The Camden Council team comprises 15 street environment officers who inspect all vehicles that are reported by members of the public as abandoned. Those that are classified fit for destruction have seven-day notices attached, and are destroyed after the seven days if they have not been moved. Any other vehicle is subject to police and DVLA checks; and if a registered keeper is found he or she is given 21 days to claim it. Camden Council report that under this system about 3,000 vehicles per annum are removed, compared to under 400 three years ago.
- **Operation Mantovani in Coventry** This scheme, which was launched in March 2000, operates over a three-week period twice a year and is implemented by a team composed of police, local authority and DVLA officers. There are two phases to the operation: first, the police and local authority officers affix seven-day notices to abandoned vehicles in areas with a high density of such vehicles. After the requisite seven days, those vehicles that have not been moved by their owners in the meantime are taken away, and at that point the DVLA enforcement unit removes vehicles that are not taxed.
- **Thames Valley scheme** A ten-day police/DVLA operation was undertaken in the Thames Valley area in February 2001. This involved three Sureway wheel-clamping teams which worked on the basis of information on AUVs passed to them by the police. Over the ten days, 305 vehicles were clamped, of which 118 were disposed of on the grounds of being in an unroadworthy, dangerous state. Extensive publicity on the television, radio and local Press preceded the operation. According to the DVLA, 1,206 motorists voluntarily re-licensed their vehicles as a result.
- **Operation Clamp in Skelmersdale, Lancashire** Operation Clamp aimed to reduce the numbers of abandoned vehicles in residential parking areas. The police worked in partnership with the DVLA and Sureway to clamp, remove and dispose of unlicensed vehicles. The local authority, housing officers and fire service also helped to target vehicles and locations. Over an eight-day period, 108 vehicles were removed from the area, of which 30 had been used by local criminals in a variety of offences. During this period, over 1,300 vehicles were taxed at local post offices.
- **Operation Minnesota, Medway, Kent** Operation Minnesota is a follow-on initiative from Cubit in Medway, which operates in short bursts of a few days and is targeted at specific areas. The first intervention took place from 10 to 14 September 2001. Like Cubit, it adopts an integrated approach involving the police, DVLA, Medway Council and the Council's contractors, and the various powers held by each agency. In addition, the police work under an agreed protocol with the Council.

Changes to regulations and legislation

The government has already responded to the growing problem of AUVs by amending regulations relating to local authority and DVLA powers. Changes to the current regulations came into force in April 2002. These changes gave local authorities the power to remove vehicles abandoned on the street anywhere in England after 24 hours instead of seven days; increased opportunities to work with DVLA to remove unlicensed cars and the power to dispose of more quickly unlicensed vehicles removed under DVLA powers (after 7 days rather than 35). Additional funding was also provided to enable tracing and clarification of vehicle ownership. [These changes will also help to facilitate an 'extended cubit scheme' discussed previously.]

Another significant development in April 2002 was the coming into force of the first part of the European Union End of Life Directive which introduces tighter environmental standards for the disposal of vehicles. These requirements are likely to increase significantly the cost of legitimate disposal of vehicles: according to the DTLR, the costs could rise to about £100 per vehicle – amounting to an overall cost of about £180 million for the 1.8 vehicles scrapped every year (DTLR, 2001).

However, the Directive should eventually reduce the economic burden on vehicle owners, since from 1 January 2002, manufacturers are required to meet all or a significant part of the costs of disposal of vehicles put on the market from this date; and from 1 January 2007, manufacturers must meet all or a significant part of the cost of disposal of all vehicles, including those produced before 2002. How exactly this will be implemented is not yet determined and it may be that vehicle owners will have to be given incentives to return their vehicles to the producer.

The need for legislative change has already been recognised by ministers in the relevant government departments (primarily the Department for Transport, but also the Home Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs). Various issues relating to vehicle registration have already been addressed by the Vehicles (Crime) Act 2001. This aims to reduce vehicle crime by introducing a package of measures designed to improve the accuracy of the record of registered vehicles. Its main provisions concern the regulation of motor salvage operators, which is intended to reduce opportunities to dispose of stolen vehicles within the motor salvage industry, and the regulation of the supply of number plates to combat vehicle 'ringing' and 'cloning' (the use of the identity of an existing or scrapped vehicle to disguise another).

While the Vehicles (Crime) Act is taking some initial steps towards tightening up the system of vehicle registration, it cannot be expected to have a major impact on licence evasion, the abandonment of vehicles and related matters. Hence the introduction of more extensive measures to formalise vehicle ownership are currently under consideration by the government. The Department for Transport have set up the Modernising Vehicle Registration Implementation Board which has the remit to take forward the recommendations of a report which considered the principles which should underlie effective vehicle registration and licensing.¹⁷ Issues under consideration include, for example, the Dutch system, under which the seller and purchaser of a vehicle are required to register the change of ownership together at a Post Office. Another possible reform is to make the last registered keeper of a vehicle liable for any subsequent offences associated with that vehicle. Under such a system, the onus would fall on any individual who wishes to sell a vehicle to validate the identity of the buyer and ensure that he or she registers the acquisition.

Any major overhaul of current licensing and registration procedures will demand a certain level of cultural change. British drivers are accustomed to a licensing and registration system that is, arguably, more motorist-friendly than most others in Europe. A consequence of this is the relative ease with which formal obligations regarding vehicle ownership are evaded by a minority of motorists. The introduction of tighter regulation should be accepted by the law-abiding majority, if they can be persuaded of the benefits this will bring.

¹⁷ See The Jill Dando Institute for Crime Science (2002) "Crime Prevention and the UK Vehicle Registration and Licensing System" London: DTLR

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