

## **Using Public Spaces Protection Orders to put the brakes on car cruising**

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# Using Public Spaces Protection Orders to put the brakes on car cruising

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## Abstract

Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) are used by local authorities in England and Wales to prohibit and/or require specific behaviours in geographically restricted areas. These provisions, introduced under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, are a civil behavioural control order that is criminal upon breach, with sanctions ranging from a £100 fixed penalty notice to a fine of £1,000 on conviction. PSPOs can restrict *any* behaviour, and local authorities are using this power in creative ways to tackle a variety of local issues ranging from swearing in the street to rough sleeping. Increasingly, PSPOs are being used to address 'car cruising' which includes behaviours such as street racing, revving engines, performing stunts, playing loud music and participating in vehicle convoys. For the first time, this paper captures the use of PSPOs to tackle car cruising in England and Wales. We quantify the number of PSPOs enacted and consider how car cruising has been conceptualised in an anti-social behaviour context, before examining how these PSPOs have been publicised, enforced and renewed. We also map the locations of car cruising PSPOs across England and Wales to visually represent where this power is being used in practice.

## Key words

Anti-social behaviour, car cruising, civil preventive powers, roads policing

## Introduction

Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) are civil behavioural control orders that are enforced within public spaces in England and Wales. They were introduced by the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to tackle anti-social behaviour (ASB) that is 'detrimental to the local community's quality of life' (Home Office, 2025:64). The behaviour in question must also be regarded as unreasonable and of a continuing/persistent nature. This vague legal test offers flexibility to local

authorities<sup>1</sup> that are empowered to implement PSPOs and enables them to respond to local issues. In practice, this means *any* behaviour can be regulated by a PSPO, which can prohibit and/or require specific behaviours within a restricted area. Breach of a PSPO is a criminal offence, which can result in a £100 fixed penalty notice (FPN),<sup>2</sup> or a fine of up to £1,000 on conviction. To date, a range of behaviours have been tackled by PSPOs across England and Wales including: street drinking, swearing, begging, and rough sleeping (Heap et al., 2022). Most of the extant literature on PSPOs focuses on how this power has been used to criminalise people experiencing street homelessness (see Brown, 2020; Heap et al., 2022a; Roberts and Archer, 2022). However, it is increasingly common to see PSPOs implemented to tackle vehicle nuisance and car cruising, which is the focus of this paper. The British Transport Police (2025) define vehicle nuisance as ‘vehicles being used in acts such as street cruising (driving up and down the street causing annoyance and bothering other road users), vehicle convoys and riding or driving on land other than a road’. Street cruising can also include behaviours such as: revving engines, repeated sudden/rapid acceleration, racing, performing stunts (e.g. handbrake turns, skidding, doughnuts, drifting), and sounding horns/playing loud music. In the UK, these behaviours are more commonly known as ‘car cruising’, which is the term we use in this paper.

The use of ASB legislation to regulate car cruising is not new. Lumsden (2013) provided an essential overview of the historical underpinnings and conceptualisation of deviant driving, ‘boy racing’ culture, and the evolving societal and policing responses: including the implementation of target hardening measures (road layout changes, CCTV, etc.), the steady growth of enforcement provisions, and the change from specific concerns about risky driving and traffic offences, to broader framings and conceptions associated with ASB. Within her research into ‘boy racers’ in Scotland, Lumsden (2013; 2014) noted a key shift in the mid-2000s from the policing of risky driving behaviours to the management of broader ASB concerns associated with street noise and disruption. This was fuelled by a change in public perceptions, where community tolerance decreased and boy racers were increasingly perceived as anti-social. Dispersal Orders, which were introduced in Scotland under the Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004, were utilised to move boy racers away from key locations. Seizure of vehicle legislation, also included within the Antisocial Behaviour etc. (Scotland) Act 2004 was used by patrol officers to regulate car modifications and car cruising without officers needing to have specific traffic expertise (Lumsden, 2014). Although Scottish ASB legislation varies

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<sup>1</sup> Local authorities provide specific services and functions within fixed geographic areas. There are currently 339 local authorities across England (317) and Wales (22). They include London Boroughs, district councils, county councils in areas of England with no district council (including the City of London Council and the Council of the Isles of Scilly), and county councils/county borough councils in Wales.

<sup>2</sup> Soon to be increased to £500 under the Crime and Policing Bill.

from that in England and Wales, this policing strategy demonstrates how car cruising was conceptualised and addressed as ASB, rather than a safety issue to be controlled via road traffic legislation.

Since Lumsden's original research, little criminological attention has been paid to the policing of car cruising in a UK context. And, despite criminology being 'coincident with the motor age' (Loader, 2025: 1), cars more broadly have not typically been a focus of criminological concern. There has been some focus on car cruising within other jurisdictions, including Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the US. For example, Yildirim-Yenier et al. (2015) explored high risk driving by car and racing enthusiasts in Ontario Canada, extending Meirambayeva et al.'s (2014) assessment of the road safety impact of street racing and stunt driving law in the same location. Australia has, perhaps, the most expansive body of car cruising-focused research, examining driving behaviours (including street racing, car meets, doughnuts, skidding, and other nuisance acts) that are commonly referred to as 'hoon driving.' For example, and slightly preceding Lumsden's work, Newitt (2012) examined police responses to hoon driving in South Australia. Earlier research included studies by Leal et al. (2009) and Clark, Scully, and Hoareau (2011) which analysed the effects of vehicle impoundment provisions as a response to hoon driving, and Folkman (2005), who assessed anti-hoon legislation in Queensland and associated policing methods. More recently, Watson-Brown et al. (2022) identified and analysed approaches to address risky and nuisance driving behaviours. Collectively, this research addresses the behavioural motivations of those who engage in hoon driving, and the effectiveness of various vehicle and road safety-focused legislative and policing responses.

The purpose of this paper is to take stock of a key ASB power that is currently being used to tackle car cruising in England and Wales, and to connect the management of this behaviour into the broader analysis of civil preventive powers, which we do in four significant ways. First, we examine the number and construction of car cruising PSPOs across England and Wales to consider the extent of their use. Second, we investigate the types of restrictions imposed to explore how car cruising has been conceptualised as ASB at a local level. Third, we examine how car cruising PSPOs have been publicised, enforced, and renewed in different localities. Finally, we illustrate the coverage of car cruising PSPOs by mapping the locations where restrictions are in place across England and Wales to visually represent their spatial progression. Together, these contributions add substantial new insight into the use of PSPOs and the policing of driver behaviour.

### **Addressing car cruising and preventive ASB powers**

### *Primary legislation*

In England and Wales, a raft of primary legislation is available to uphold standards of driving and to tackle driving that could be perceived as car cruising. For example, the Road Traffic Act 1988 outlaws dangerous driving (Section 2A), careless and inconsiderate driving (Section 3), and motor racing on public ways (Section 12). Dangerous driving is the more serious offence and constitutes driving in a manner that falls 'far below' what is expected of a competent and careful driver. According to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) (2025), this includes behaviours such as racing, driving aggressively, and 'particularly inappropriate' speeding. Careless and inconsiderate driving is an allied but lesser offence, defined as falling 'below' the standard expected of a competent and careful driver. The CPS (2025) suggests behaviours can include: inappropriate speeding, overtaking on the inside, and other 'misjudgements.' All the behaviours that can be categorised as dangerous and/or careless driving could be associated with car cruising. Penalties for breaching these sections of the Road Traffic Act 1988 range from £100 FPNs and disqualification from driving, up to 14 years imprisonment for the most serious offences.

Section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002 deals more specifically with anti-social driving. It addresses behaviour that contravenes Sections 3 and 34 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 and broadens the scope of those behaviours to include driving 'that is causing, or is likely to cause alarm, distress, or annoyance to members of the public'. On breach, police have the power to seize vehicles following a warning or issue a fine of up to £1,000. Seizure results in the impounding of the vehicle and, to facilitate its release, the owner must attend a police station within seven days with the required documentation. The owner must also pay a statutory removal fee that is determined by the Road Traffic Act 1988 (Retention and Disposal of Seized Motor Vehicles) (Amendment) Regulations 2008, plus daily storage charges accrued in addition to any fine issued. Section 59 is a potent power given the subjectivity of the definition and the inclusion of the low threshold of 'annoyance'. It enables individual officers to apply their discretion to determine the threshold for intervention, a point that varies considerably in relation to other ASB enforcement options and consequently widens the net of social control (Heap and Black, 2024).

### *Competing levels of governance*

Roads policing is traditionally the responsibility of the 43 police forces in England and Wales. The 2022-2025 National Roads Policing Strategy provides four key pillars of activity: preventing harm and saving lives, tackling crime, driving technology and innovation, and changing minds (National Police Chiefs' Council, 2022). With the pillars relating heavily to casualty reduction, the Strategy does not mention

anti-social driving and/or car cruising. However, directly elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs),<sup>3</sup> who oversee policing within their force area, bridge this ASB gap. PCCs were introduced through the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011 which substantially revised the governance and accountability of police forces. The premise was to democratise policing, with PCCs utilising public input to develop local policing priorities and ensure that Chief Constables are held to account for delivering them; a framework which has been extensively critiqued elsewhere (see Reiner, 2013; Lister and Rowe, 2013; Turner, 2014). Wells (2018) studied PCC's engagement with roads policing, which identified a tendency to reflect public concerns about speeding. However, 'quality of life' issues relating to anti-social driving and parking were also reported by PCCs as common public grievances. It is no surprise that 'quality of life' issues were highlighted in this way because ASB has been a significant, long-standing public concern (Mackenzie et al., 2010). However, Wells (2018: 111) notes how PCCs are 'increasingly being challenged to take action in respect of local issues that may represent an extension of the policing brief', a sentiment that was also found by Loader et al. (2025), who frame everyday car concerns as 'auto-othering'. They suggest automotive harms, including anti-social car use, lead to calls for greater or additional enforcement by policing bodies. These data help to illustrate why car cruising is emerging as an area of increasing enforcement, even if it does not feature in the National Roads Policing Strategy.

Reflecting the plurality of policing in England and Wales (Crawford, 2012), further stakeholders within this congested sphere of governance are local authorities, who are responsible for the implementation of PSPOs. Due to the flexible and subjective nature of the 2014 legislation, PSPOs can be applied to car cruising in public spaces and, therefore, offer a supplementary alternative to primary legislation. PSPO requirements also mean that any behaviours that are potentially associated with car cruising can be prohibited. This includes sub-criminal behaviours, such as noise nuisance, and enforcement action can be taken at a lower behavioural threshold. Indeed, local authorities are encouraged to use PSPO powers to address car cruising, with their use promoted as an effective solution to such problems (Resolve, 2024). The involvement of local authorities also shifts the focus away from considerations of safety to the regulation of nuisance, as shown in Lumsden's (2013; 2014) work.

#### *Problems with preventive powers*

Notwithstanding competing and overlapping policing priorities, there are a range of fundamental concerns associated with preventive ASB powers. PSPOs are an example of a civil behavioural control

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<sup>3</sup> This role is undertaken by the Deputy Mayor in Mayoral Combined Authorities, which include: Greater Manchester, London, West Yorkshire, and York and North Yorkshire; and the Mayor in South Yorkshire.

order, which acts in a pre-emptive and preventive capacity to protect the community from *potential* future harms. Ashworth and Zedner (2014) recognise that the state has a duty to prevent harm but suggest that if risk is to be criminalised, a range of restraining principles should apply. Since their inception in England and Wales through the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, preventive ASB powers have been criticised for their lack of restraint, and early concerns about the vague definition of offending behaviour endure (see Ashworth et al., 1998). Donoghue (2010: 151) suggests that the subjective nature of preventive orders requires 'rigour and standardisation' in their application. Initial empirical research into PSPOs demonstrates an absence of such standards (Archer, 2023; Brown, 2020; Heap et al., 2022a).

The subjectivities associated with civil preventive orders also reflect changes in terminology and the blurring of distinctions between crime, disorder and ASB (Matthews and Briggs, 2008). Burney (2006) explains how legal definitions of nuisance have evolved over time, with the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and Housing Act 1996 laying the foundations in statute to curb offensive behaviours such as noise nuisance. Most recently, Section 78 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 introduced a new statutory offence of intentionally or recklessness causing public nuisance, highlighting how the control of nuisance behaviour remains a contemporary concern. The difference between these powers and PSPOs, as well as other behavioural control orders, is that the orders are predicated on managing the risk of specific, often non-criminal, nuisance behaviours. Critically, when used in the context of ASB, terms such as nuisance, harassment, alarm or distress, are not legally defined, further blurring the boundaries between social control, crime and ASB prevention.

Criticism has also been levelled at the nature of the two-step hybrid approach to preventive powers, where a civil order becomes criminal upon breach. Crawford (2009: 818) highlights how this process evades 'higher standards of proof associated with the criminal justice process'. This is evident in PSPO practice because the order is issued by a local authority rather than a court, meaning the usual procedural safeguards do not apply. Whilst PSPOs can be appealed at court, the criteria to do so are limited and individuals have little/no recourse to challenge a FPN issued upon breach. Similar concerns with hybrid provisions are evident in other jurisdictions. In Australia, Victoria Police are empowered to issue 72-hour bans, covering expansive public areas (such as the centre of Melbourne) to prevent people from engaging in ASB. In referring to these provisions as 'collective pre-victimisation', Farmer (2017a) confirms that bans can be imposed pre-emptively, no evidence of actual or intended problematic behaviours are required for a ban to be issued, there is no provision to appeal the imposition of a ban, and breaches (which can entail simply being in a public area) can be progressed

via the Magistrates' Court (Farmer 2017b; 2019a). The absence of restraining principles is also evident within hybrid provisions to prohibit and exclude that can be imposed in response to potential or actual nuisance behaviours by non-law enforcement actors, such as licensees or school principals (Farmer 2019b; 2022; 2024).

A longstanding and significant concern about preventive ASB powers centres on their (dis)proportionate use. Preventive proportionality should reflect the 'harm sought to be averted and the likelihood that the harm would occur in the absence of prevention' (Steiker, 2013: 196). The opportunity for PSPOs to prevent *any* behaviour creates an opportunity to punish behaviours beyond the scope of the ASB in question, which widens the net of criminalisation (JUSTICE, 2023). The spatial nature of PSPOs also creates the potential for restrictions to be in place that exceed the geography of the problem, thus constraining behaviours in unnecessary ways. Previous research has shown that PSPOs are used in a manner that duplicates primary legislation. For example, PSPOs designed to tackle ASB associated with people experiencing street homelessness have been used in combination with the Vagrancy Act 1824, which meant individuals 'walked a tightrope of potential enforcement action' (Heap et al., 2022a: 79). This 'layering' of police powers creates volatile spaces of enforcement where individuals face being punished by one or multiple powers, each with different sanctions (Heap et al., 2022a). This paper investigates how car cruising PSPOs have been constructed to function as a preventive power and explores the intersection of car cruising PSPOs with existing concerns about their broader implementation and enforcement.

### *The extent of car cruising*

Despite the range of powers, there is little statistical evidence to indicate the extent of car cruising in England and Wales. This position reflects a serious lack of oversight by the state, given the increasing number of means available to tackle the problem. For example, the Home Office does not collect data on vehicles seized under Section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002 (Murphy and Johnson, 2024) and there are no figures recorded as part of the government's official Criminal Justice Statistics to confirm the number of people prosecuted in relation to Section 59. It is, therefore, difficult to assess the extent to which this power is being used. While offences related to the Road Traffic Act 1988 are included as part of the Criminal Justice Statistics dataset, the nature of the offence is not. Car cruising recorded by the police as ASB is classified as a 'non-crime' ASB incident under the 'nuisance' category, which is an amalgamation of all ASB incidents that affect the community (College of Policing, 2025). Car cruising is not routinely extrapolated from 'nuisance' and even if it was, it would rely on individual officers consistently recording the incidents as car cruising for accurate figures to be obtained. Consequently,



it is difficult to discern the extent of car cruising in England and Wales, or how it is policed, from official data sources.

In 2024, The Automobile Association (AA) published data derived via Freedom of Information requests made to every police force in England and Wales in relation to the number of unauthorised 'car meets' or 'car cruises' that had taken place in 2022, 2023 and 2024. Responses from 15/45 forces showed a general trend of an increasing number of car meets over time. However, these figures should be treated with caution due to the low response rate which, in itself, highlights further issues with the quality of available data through which to explore this issue. The AA (2024) also conducted a public perception survey, of over 10,000 people: 10% of respondents reported an increase in car meets in their area over the preceding twelve months, with 80% of those citing excess noise, 55% noting the presence of tyre marks left in car parks, and 25% reporting more damage to streetlights and signposts as a result of the increased number of events.

Alongside these data, in recent years several fatalities at car meets involving young people have been widely reported in the media. For example, in 2022 Connor Richards (23) died and ten others were injured when a car collided with another vehicle and crashed into spectators in Scunthorpe (Wood, 2022). In the same year, Samuel Harding (20) died when he was struck by a car at a meet in Warrington (Okell, 2022), and in 2024 Liberty Charris (16) and Ben Corfield (19) were killed in the West Midlands after a car hit pedestrians who had gathered in a group on the A457 carriageway (Warburton, 2024). These high-profile cases contrast with road casualty data from the Department for Transport (2024), which show a long-term decline in the number of fatalities since 1979, with a five percent reduction in fatalities between 2022 and 2023. However, the circumstances of these deaths highlight safety concerns associated with car meets/car cruising and offer a different perspective to these activities being considered anti-social. The small amount of data available, coupled with the loss of lives, illustrates why policing bodies are increasingly taking action to address car cruising.

### **Methodology**

Desk-based research was conducted between October and December 2024 to ascertain the number of active car cruising PSPOs in England and Wales. As no central database of PSPOs exists (Heap and Dickinson, 2018), a systematic search was conducted of every local authority website in England and Wales, based on the most recent list of 317 local authority areas in England (GOV.UK, 2024) and 22 in Wales (Welsh Local Government Association, 2025). Statutory Home Office guidance (2025) states that local authorities must publish the details of PSPOs on their websites to ensure openness and accountability. Therefore, all active orders should have been available to generate data from 339 local

authorities across the two countries. As data collection was undertaken by an experienced researcher with knowledge of PSPOs and local authorities, we are confident that every available order was located. However, the quality and accessibility of the websites varied substantially between areas, and it is possible that some orders could have been missed due to inadequately updated web pages and/or poorly built websites. This limitation may bias the results towards the practices of local authorities that have the resources (financial and technological) to create easily navigable websites. We also acknowledge that, despite the skills of the researcher, the data collection was subject to human error. These limitations could have been ameliorated by employing web scraping techniques (see Mitchell, 2024), but this approach was not viable for such a small exploratory study.

As no active car cruising PSPOs were found to be situated in Wales, this study focuses on England. When an active PSPO was located, key details were recorded on a database including: the issuing date, whether it had been renewed (and when), the geographical coverage of the order (e.g. whole local authority or a specific restricted area), the type of order (e.g. stand-alone car cruising order or part of a larger all-encompassing order), and details of the prohibitions/requirements. An examination of every local authority website also facilitated the discovery of additional ASB powers being used to tackle car cruising. To facilitate consideration of relevant political drivers or patterns, the PSPO issuing date was used to identify the controlling/major political party within each local authority at the time of initial implementation. The police force within which each local authority sits was also noted and informed the identification of the political alignment of the relevant PCC/Mayoral Combined Authority (MCA) at the time of implementation. This part of the data collection was drawn from online UK Electoral Commission resources. Utilising the database, a mapping exercise was conducted to illustrate the geographical coverage of the PSPOs. The mapping visualisation drew from open-source projects, including the Leaflet Mapping Engine, the Simple Screenshot Leaflet plugin, and the Go Echo web server. Original source Office for National Statistics (ONS) boundary data was converted using tools from the [ONSvisual/uk-topojson](https://onsvisual.uk-topojson) open source project, and PSPO data was processed using the Miller CSV processor.<sup>4</sup> Geo-codes were assigned to each local authority across England which has an active, renewed, or elapsed car cruising PSPO. Three mapping views were created:

- All PSPOs
- PSPO geographical coverage (whole area PSPOs v. restricted area/s PSPOs)
- PSPO type (car cruising as a standalone PSPO v. embedded within a larger PSPO)

For each of these three views, time series illustrate the current picture and facilitate analysis of the temporal and locational development of PSPOs, using the date of first implementation within each

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<sup>4</sup> The resulting open-source deliverable can be made available upon request.

local authority. An additional view depicts the controlling/most prominent political party within each respective local authority when the car cruising PSPO was first implemented. Figures reflecting each of these views are included across the findings.

## Findings

### *Taking stock of car cruising PSPOs*

At the point of data finalisation, there were 69 active PSPOs in England containing car cruising prohibitions which were created by 65 different local authorities in 26 police force areas; there were no active orders in Wales. Supplementary Table 1 provides summary data relating to each active PSPO. The local authorities with active PSPOs are depicted in Figure 1. During data collection eight areas were identified to be engaged in, or had recently completed, the consultation process to implement similar orders, four of these converted into active orders and are included in our total.<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing, the remaining four areas had not implemented the proposed PSPO. From the data available, 46 of the PSPOs were in their first iteration, with 23 having renewed and/or extended previous orders. The vast majority of PSPOs (38) were first implemented in 2022 and 2023, which highlights a growing trend in use over the past three years. However, their use to tackle car cruising is not entirely new, with one area having had their PSPO in place since 2015.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cannock Chase District Council approved its PSPO in late 2024, for implementation in January 2025. This PSPO has been included in our data.

<sup>6</sup> Ten local authorities had implemented PSPOs that appear to have addressed car cruising, but which have since expired without renewal. Data for these PSPOs were difficult to discern and, in order to minimise the risk of error, PSPOs implemented by the following local authorities have been excluded from this analysis and from all Figures included in this paper: Brentwood; Flintshire; High Peak; Horsham; Enfield; Monmouthshire; North Kesteven; South Hams; Staffordshire Moorlands; Stratford-on-Avon.

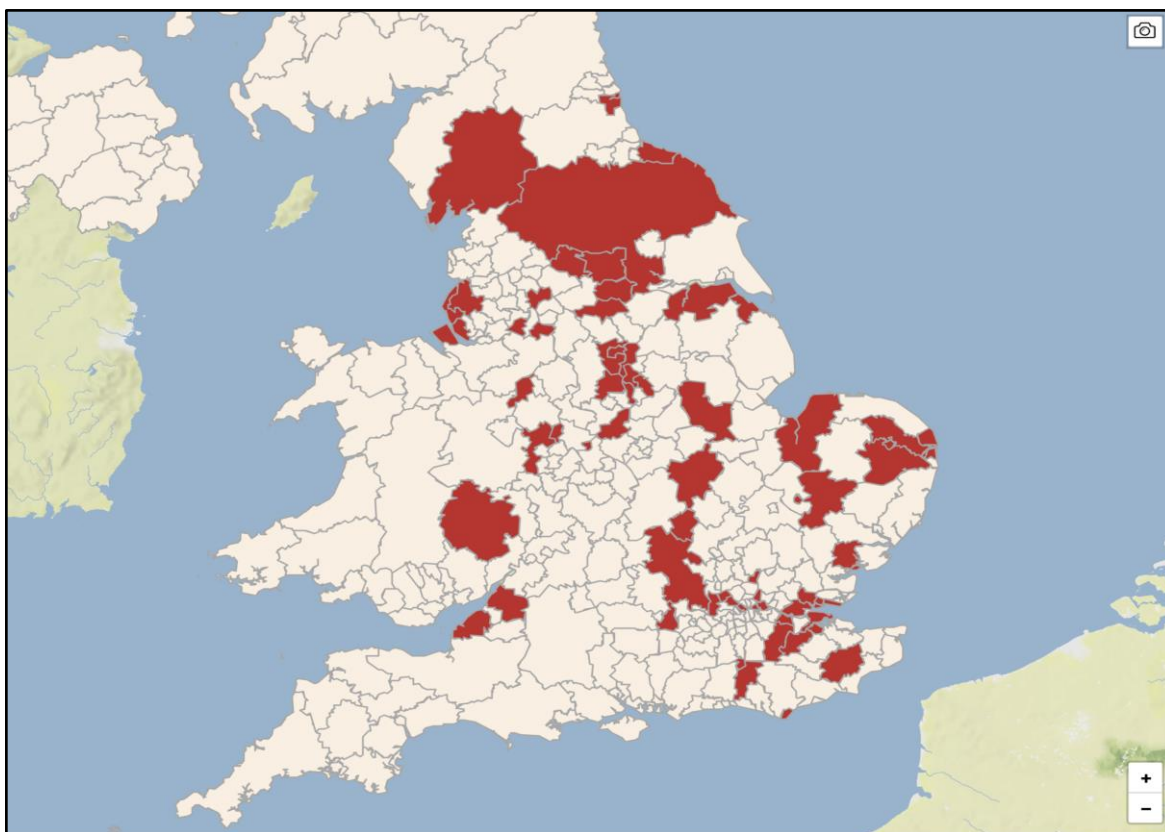


Figure 1: Local authorities with approved/active PSPOs @ end 2024

In addition to the use of PSPOs, the data collection identified six local authorities that have implemented Injunctions Against Persons Unknown, from Section 222 of the Local Government Act (1972), to specifically prohibit car cruising throughout their local authority areas. These have been implemented in the West Midlands region: Birmingham City Council granted their first injunction in 2016, an interim injunction in 2022 and a three-year injunction in 2024; Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, and Wolverhampton came together to secure a joint ‘Black Country’<sup>7</sup> injunction across their respective areas in 2024. The latter was introduced following the deaths of Charris and Corfield in the West Midlands that year, as detailed earlier in this paper. Most recently, Enfield Council in North London was granted an interim injunction in late 2024, a location which had a PSPO in place from 2021, but which lapsed in early 2024. This divergence of practice is interesting from policy and policing perspectives, particularly conceptually as the intervention is premised on road safety rather than ASB, and because of the range of enforcement options available upon breach. To retain the analytical focus on PSPOs, we return to Injunctions Against Persons Unknown in the discussion section.

<sup>7</sup> The ‘Black Country’ is a term used to describe an area of the West Midlands known for its industrial heritage, which encompasses Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton.

### Political governance

The major or majority party within each local authority at the time of the implementation of the initial PSPO is noted in Supplementary Table 1. The findings are aggregated by party in Table 1, with Figure 2 providing a visual depiction by local authority. The data points to no findings of particular note, suggesting that car cruising PSPOs are not aligned to any particular or identifiable political perspective.

Table 1: Local authority major/majority party at the time of PSPO implementation (\*Tower Hamlets coalition)

Major/Majority Party	Number
Conservative	24
Labour	22
No Overall Control	15
Liberal Democrat	2
Independent	1
ASPIRE *	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>65</b>

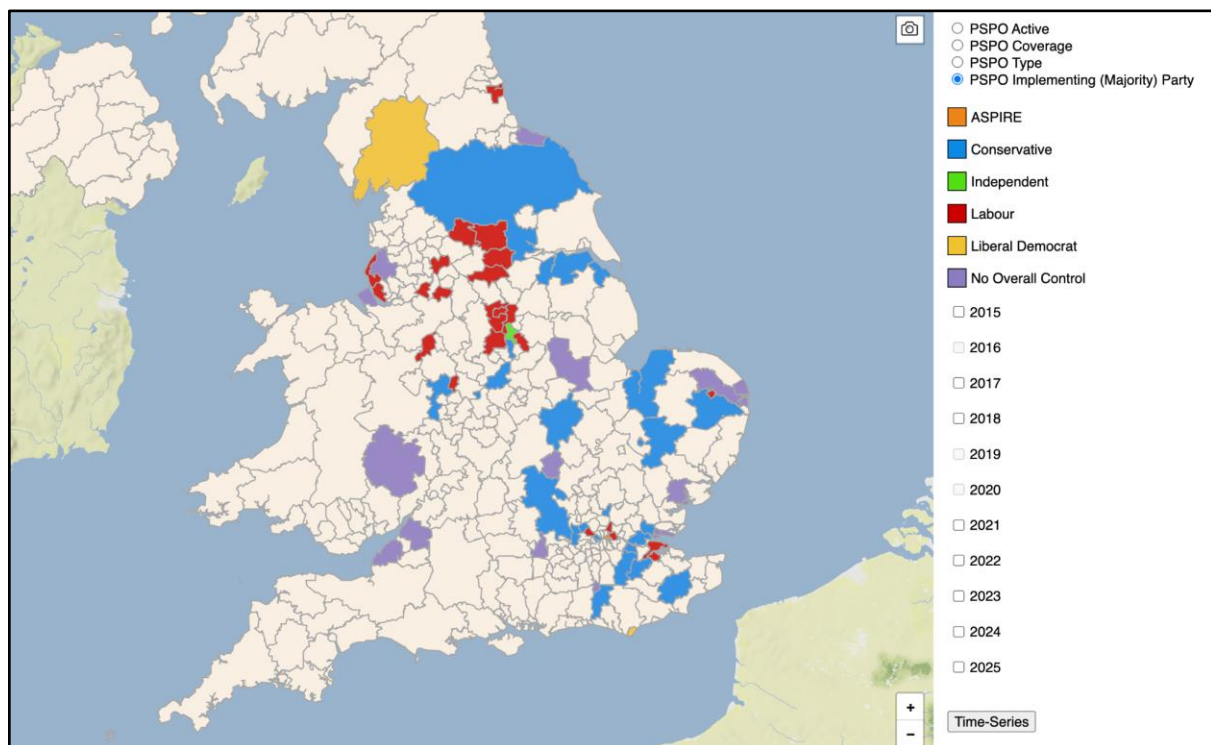


Figure 2: The major or majority party within each local authority at the time of initial PSPO implementation.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The checkboxes alongside 2016, 2019, and 2020 are greyed out within the Figure 2 key as no PSPOs were implemented in those years. This also applies to all other Figures.

Table 2 aggregates the political alignment of each relevant PCC or MCA<sup>9</sup> at the point of PSPO implementation. These roles sit at a police force level, and the local authorities with active PSPOs cover 26 different police force areas. There is a clear two-party alignment, which is dominated by the Conservative Party. Given the lack of political alignment at a local authority level, it is difficult to infer much from these data without examining key issues within each local context, as well as the specific reasoning that prompted and supported the development of each PSPO.

Table 2: PCC/MCA political alignment at the time of PSPO implementation

<b>PCC/MCA Political Alignment</b>	<b>Number</b>
Conservative	45
Labour	20
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>65</b>

PCC Crime Plans were also analysed for the 26 force areas containing an active car cruising PSPO. The purpose was to assess if driver behaviours were mentioned, and if so, whether this was conceptualised as a safety concern allied with the National Roads Policing Strategy, or as nuisance/ASB, and if political affiliation was influential. All but one Crime Plan mentioned driving. Road safety was mentioned in 19 Crime Plans, and the remaining six mentioned both road safety and anti-social road use. There is no discernible pattern about the PCCs that included ASB in their Crime Plans, even when political affiliation was taken into account (2 Labour, 2 Conservative and 2 Liberal Democrat), but it is interesting to see the extent to which strategic policing priorities are aligned at different layers of governance.

### *Size and scope of PSPOs*

Looking beyond the descriptive statistics about the implementation of PSPOs, the unique application of the power begins to show when examining the specific orders, which illustrates how each PSPO has been developed in response to local problems. There are two main ways in which this is evident: the size of the restricted area, and the scope of the order itself (both of which are depicted within Supplementary Table 1). When studying the detail of the orders, the ‘restricted areas’, the geographical spaces where the prohibitions and requirements operate, are applied in one of two ways. The restrictions either apply to the whole local authority area, which is the case for 31 of the PSPOs, or they are confined to one or more specified restricted areas, as is the case for the remaining 38. The latter vary in geography from one or two streets to whole neighbourhoods. Figure 3 illustrates where

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<sup>9</sup> Mayor with PCC responsibilities absorbed

PSPOs apply to the whole local authority, and those which cover single and multiple restricted areas within a local authority.

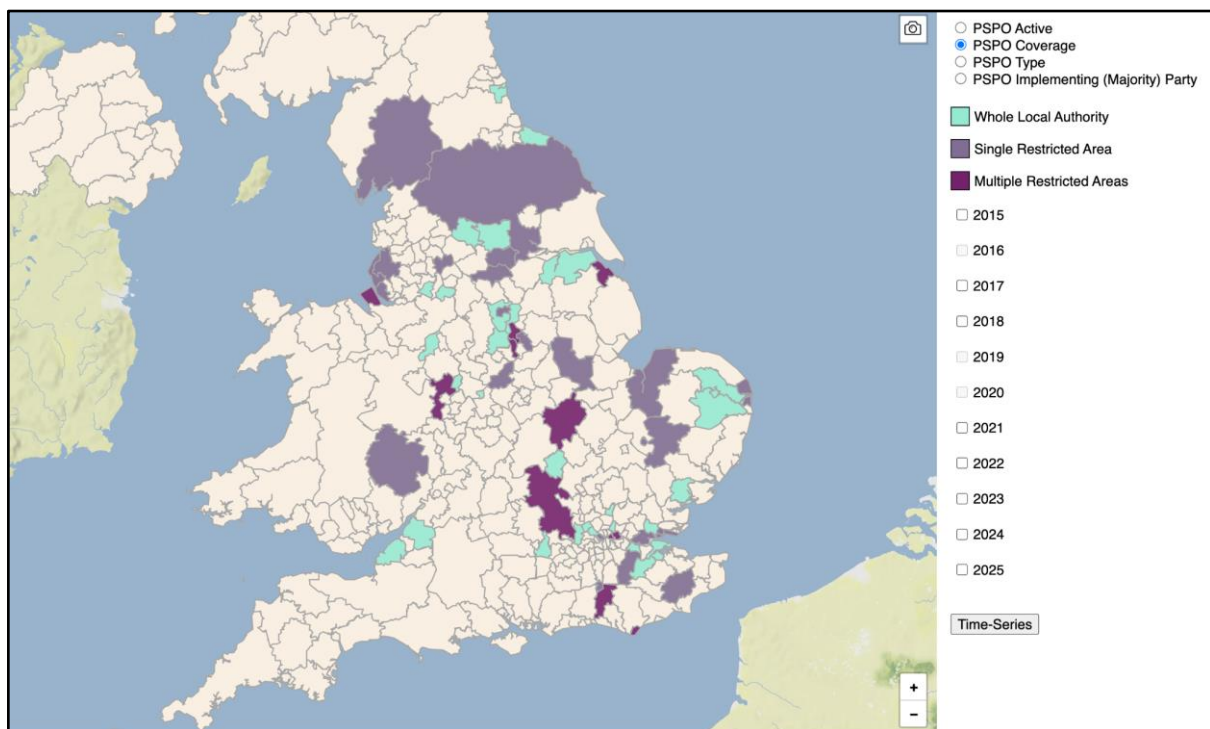


Figure 3: PSPO coverage: whole local authority and restricted area/s within local authorities (active/approved PSPOs @ end 2024)

The composition of the PSPO also varies greatly. For example, 49 contain prohibitions and requirements solely related to car cruising, and can be described as stand-alone car cruising PSPOs. The remaining 20 PSPOs contain one or more car cruising prohibitions as part of a multi-component PSPO that tackles a range of ASB problems, such as street drinking or littering, often called ‘town-centre’ PSPOs. For example, one PSPO includes a single car cruising-related prohibition within a list of forty restricted behaviours. Figure 4 confirms which local authorities have standalone car cruising PSPOs and which are embedded within more expansive orders.



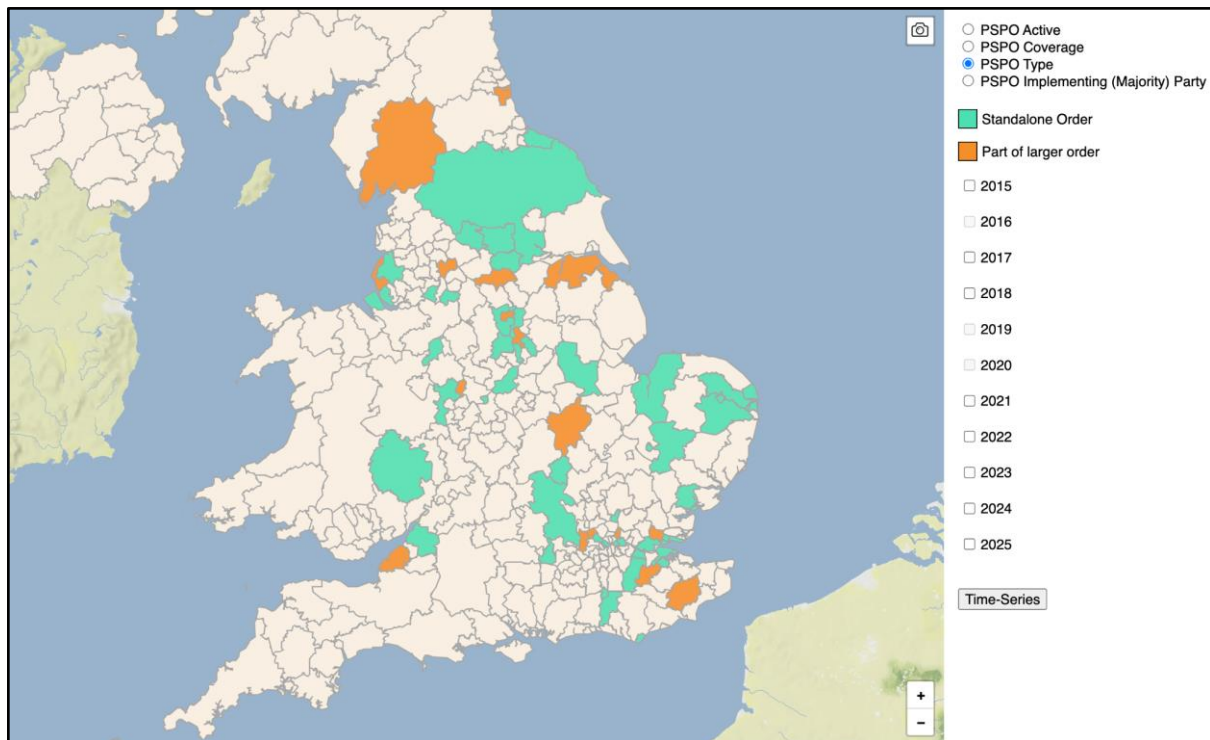


Figure 4: PSPO type: standalone car cruising PSPOs and multi-component PSPOs (active/approved PSPOs @ end 2024).

There is no discernible pattern between the geography of the order or their composition. Of the standalone PSPOs, 27 operate in a specified restricted area, with the remaining 22 covering the whole local authority area. This mix and match of policy provisions exemplifies the confusing ‘patchwork quilt’ approach O’Brien (2016: 184) warned of when considering the imposition of behavioural restrictions in public spaces.

#### *Conceptualising car cruising as ASB*

In acknowledgement of Lumsden’s (2014) previous findings that detail the shift from car cruising as risky driving behaviour to one that is anti-social, as well as the juxtaposition within strategic policing documents between saving lives and preventing ASB, we analysed the 49 stand-alone car cruising PSPOs to assess how these behaviours are currently conceptualised. Aside from two PSPOs that were identical, every PSPO was different. A total of 41 different behaviours were identified across the sample, but a core set featured heavily. Table 3 lists the six most commonly included behaviours, and which were noted within more than half of the PSPOs, albeit worded or grouped slightly differently.



Table 3: Most common six behaviours included within active PSPOs

Behaviour	Number of PSPOs
Performing stunts using motor vehicles: including but not limited to drifting, performing doughnuts, skidding, handbrake turns, and wheel spinning; and the racing of motor vehicles	44
Causing excessive noise; causing or allowing loud music to be played from a vehicle or a portable device to cause a nuisance	41
Sounding horns other than in accordance with the Highway Code	39
Revvng of engines to cause a nuisance	36
Causing obstruction on the highway, whether moving or stationary, including driving in convoy	35
Using foul, threatening, intimidating or abusive language (which in four areas also specified sexual language and making sexual suggestions)	28

There were several other points of note relating to the restrictions imposed. First, is the presence of specific behaviours that are already against the law. Some featured in the ‘top six’ restrictions, such as racing, which is considered dangerous driving as per the Road Traffic Act 1988. Sounding the horn in contravention of Rule 112 of the Highway Code can attract a Fixed Penalty Notice (FPN) or a fine of up to £1000 under regulation 99 of The Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986; and obstructing the highway is governed by Section 137 of the Highways Act 1980. Another frequent restriction was excessive speed, which was included on 26 PSPOs. Notwithstanding the vagueness of the word ‘excessive’, speeding and speed limits are already controlled by the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, with ‘particularly inappropriate’ speeding considered dangerous driving under Section 2A of the Road Traffic Act 1988. Two PSPOs also included restrictions relating to obstructing and/or being abusive to the police, which demonstrates reach beyond traditional car cruising behaviours. Wilfully obstructing the police in the execution of their duty is contained in Section (89)2 of the Police Act 1996. This duplication of existing legislation demonstrates the ‘layering’ of powers through PSPOs in a car cruising context, which has already been seen with other PSPOs relating to street homelessness (Heap et al., 2022). However, the street homelessness PSPOs only duplicated the Vagrancy Act 1824, whereas our evidence suggests car cruising PSPOs replicate a much larger number of powers per order. Two PSPOs went further still, by stating that no person shall commit ‘any traffic offence covered by legislation’. This ultimate example of layering captures the full extent and breadth of the reach afforded by PSPO powers. By duplicating existing legislation, this reach enables enforcement officers to bypass traditional procedural safeguards, which undermines the rule of law. When considering acts such as speeding it also creates a bifurcated process of enforcement; the standard legal route where infractions are monitored and penalty points applied, and the FPN route where no such monitoring takes place. This could have significant safety implications if people with existing speeding points can

discharge their liability through a FPN instead of potentially losing their driving licence, and further underlines why the process of PSPO implementation and enforcement requires government oversight.

Second, is the inclusion of generic requirements, such as committing *any* ASB and/or nuisance. This was included in 17 PSPOs. Generic requirements widen the scope of behaviours restricted by PSPOs and give policing bodies greater discretion to sanction behaviours perceived to be causing a problem. This practice has been seen in other studies examining the implementation of PSPOs (Archer, 2023; Heap et al., 2022a), as well as research into other ASB powers such as Community Protection Notices (Heap et al., 2022b). The inclusion of generic requirements within car cruising PSPOs demonstrates their widespread use by local authorities. Generic requirements are incongruent with the original scope of the PSPO and disproportionately pre-empt risk. Furthermore, in a car cruising context, general ASB is already covered by Section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002, which allows action to be taken if driving causes or is likely to cause alarm, distress or annoyance. This is another example of PSPOs duplicating existing legislation and layering powers in restricted areas. Arguably, the inclusion of generic requirements enables the management of behaviours outside of the driving context, such as the behaviour exhibited by people who watch car cruising or who attend car meets. Nevertheless, if certain behaviours are deemed a problem they can be specifically noted in the requirements without the necessity to resort to generic ASB or potentially dealt with under the Public Order Act 1986.

Third, is the range of requirements that are not directly associated with car cruising, but which reflect the conceptualisation of nuisance associated with car cruising. These behaviours feature on many other PSPOs (see Heap et al., 2022a; Archer, 2023). In our sample, 18 included congregating/loitering, 13 listed littering, and urination/defecation was included on four. A range of further types of ASB were noted on fewer than three orders, which included: throwing items, the use of drugs/drug paraphernalia, setting off fireworks, consuming alcohol, and spitting. Several novel and/or innovative requirements were also evident in the sample, such as prohibiting the recording of the prohibited activities on any device, promoting/publicising/organising a car cruise event, undertaking ongoing repairs in car parks or on the public highway, and attending a car cruise event to sell goods, services, food or drinks. These requirements, alongside the use of foul, threatening, intimidating or abusive language, which featured in the top six, highlight the breadth of behaviours considered to be a problem beyond the driving itself. This demonstrates how car cruising PSPOs are created to serve a dual purpose of managing driver as well as spectator behaviours.

Fourth, is the balance between road safety and ASB requirements. Only 21 PSPOs in the sample, less than half, included a safety-related requirement prohibiting ‘creating a danger or risk of injury to road users including pedestrians.’ This was the only requirement that explicitly focused on road safety, despite the prioritisation of casualty reduction that is evident in the National Roads Policing Strategy (2022) and in PCC Crime Plans. This finding illustrates how car cruising PSPOs are primarily focused on tackling ASB, further reinforcing the shift towards the management of nuisance behaviours evidenced by Lumsden (2013; 2014). The nature of this requirement also shows further duplication of existing legislation, as it intersects with Section 3 of the Road Traffic Act 1988, which already prohibits use of ‘...a mechanically propelled vehicle on a road or other public place without due care and attention, or without reasonable consideration for other persons using the road or place’.

Finally, two PSPOs included a dispersal requirement. This enables policing bodies to require an individual to leave the area and not return for a period of 24-hours if they have been engaging in, or encouraging others to engage in, behaviour that has or is likely to have a detrimental effect on the quality of life of others in the local community. This practice replicates the Dispersal Order power, which Lumsden (2014) noted was used in Scotland to tackle boy racers. Dispersal requirements are extremely problematic when included as part of a PSPO because it creates a hybrid PSPO-dispersal power. We have criticised this practice elsewhere for making dispersal powers available beyond the usual 48-hour scope as well as enabling a greater range of policing bodies to require someone to disperse (Heap et al., 2022a). Furthermore, the inclusion of these requirements bypasses the senior police authorisation necessary to secure a Dispersal Order, causing a key procedural safeguard to be ignored. The inclusion of dispersal requirements in car cruising PSPOs highlights the persistent overreach of PSPO powers.

#### *Post-implementation: publicity, enforcement and renewal*

Little is known about how PSPOs are monitored and enforced. Some local authorities proactively encourage reports of anti-social driving within their PSPO; Operation Crackdown is run by Mid Sussex Council, with a range of data reported online on a monthly basis. However, our research indicates that this level of monitoring and data sharing is an exception. Other local authorities, such as Kensington and Chelsea Royal Borough Council, support the enforcement of their PSPO through the use of acoustic Closed-Circuit Television (CCTV) cameras. Car cruising PSPOs are enforced by police and local authorities. However, mirroring the issues set out earlier in this paper with respect to measuring the extent of car cruising, there is no clear record of PSPO enforcement activities. Local authorities are not required to record or to publish data, although some have included relevant data within PSPO renewal proposals. For example, in their October 2024 renewal proposal, Dartford Borough Council provided

a summary of incident data relating to reports of three driving-related ASB categories targeted within the PSPO. The proposal reported a 55.6% reduction in reports since 2020 which the council attributed, primarily, to their PSPO. However, reported incident data is not necessarily reliable, and the provision of data within other renewal proposals is inconsistent.

From an enforcement perspective, there are questions about the ability of policing bodies to enforce car cruising PSPOs over large spaces, particularly when orders cover whole local authority areas. How and whether policing bodies manage this requires further research, as we know that raising public expectations that action will be taken to tackle ASB can compound experiences of victimisation if these expectations are not met (Heap, 2021). The level of community awareness about car cruising PSPOs, broadly and within each local authority, is also unknown. Some local authorities deploy signage within specific locations, with signs containing variable levels of information - see Figures 5 and 6 for two different examples. Overall, there is no consistent approach to the nature, type, or extent of PSPO publicity, and PSPOs are implemented autonomously by local authorities.



Figure 5: PSPO sign, Leeds <sup>10</sup>

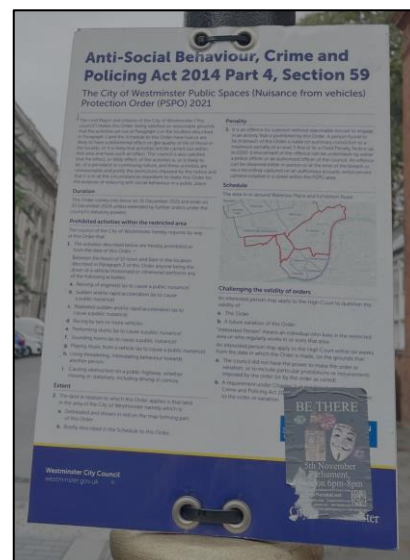


Figure 6: PSPO sign, City of Westminster <sup>11</sup>

Closely tied to enforcement, is the matter of whether the PSPO is still required or not. PSPOs can be implemented for a maximum of three years, at which point they expire. PSPOs can be renewed by the

<sup>10</sup> Photo credit: Associate Professor Vicky Heap

<sup>11</sup> Photo credit: Dr Benjamin Archer

local authority if it is deemed necessary to prevent the occurrence or recurrence of the ASB in question, and to prevent an increase in frequency or severity of the behaviour. From the information available, 23 of the PSPOs have been renewed and/or have extended previous orders. Similar to the process when a PSPO is implemented, local authorities should consult the local police and appropriate community representatives before renewal (Home Office, 2025). Some local authorities have initiated community consultations prior to considering the renewal or extension of existing PSPOs, whereas others appear to renew by default, citing an ongoing need to deter and prevent nuisance, ASB, and/or unreasonable conduct. There is very little data available to quantify the nature and/or extent of the ongoing need. Where data are available, public consultations are undertaken via online surveys with majoritarian perspectives given precedence. This practice has been observed in PSPO implementation, with Brown (2020) and Archer (2023) highlighting the exclusionary nature of the online format. Furthermore, in our sample, the available consultation documents demonstrate very low sample sizes in the tens and the low hundreds, for a decision that affects public spaces used by tens of thousands of people. Thus, the majoritarian view is not representative of the population.

#### *Mapping car cruising PSPOs in England*

There is no clear or predictable pattern with respect to the specific location and locational progression of car cruising PSPOs. Figures 7, 8, 9, and 10 provide four snapshot views, depicting the locations of active PSPOs at the end of 2018, 2021, 2022, and 2024.



Figure 7: Active PSPOs @ end 2018

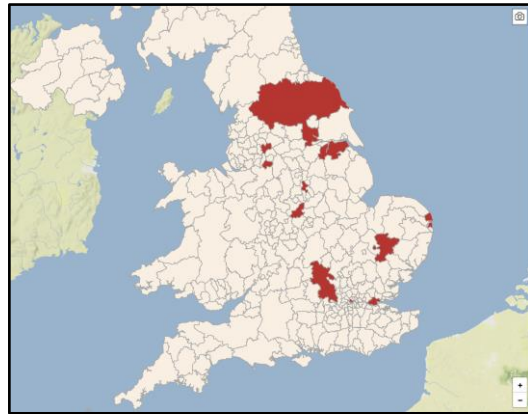


Figure 8: Active PSPOs @ end 2021

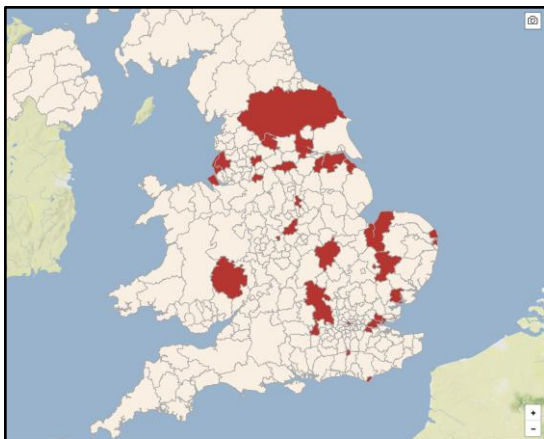


Figure 9: Active PSPOs @ end 2022

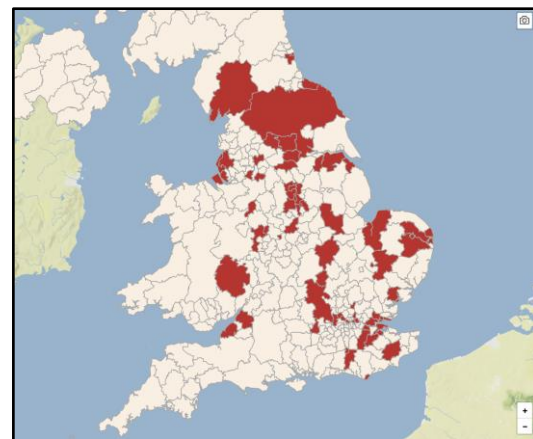


Figure 10: Active/Approved PSPOs @ end 2024

There is some evidence of locational clustering, with contiguous jurisdictions implementing PSPOs following implementation by an initial local authority. Examples include:

- Yorkshire and surrounding areas: following initial implementation by North Yorkshire Council in September 2021, there are now 7 x contiguous local authorities in the area with active PSPOs.
- East Midlands: following initial implementation by North Lincolnshire Council in October 2021, there are now 7 x contiguous local authorities in the area with active PSPOs.
- South East: following initial implementation by Thurrock Council in December 2021, there are now 9 x contiguous local authorities in the area with active PSPOs.
- North West England and Merseyside: following initial implementation by Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council in April 2022, there are now 5 x local authorities in the area with active PSPOs.

The potential for PSPOs to cause spatial displacement has been a longstanding concern (Heap and Dickinson, 2018). The clustering and contagion of car cruising PSPOs evidenced above shows this displacement in practice for the first time. It is further underlined by how one local authority framed their rationale for the necessity of a PSPO, which was being considered at the time of our data collection. The South Gloucestershire consultation documentation (2023: 3) states:

*If a PSPO was not adopted then geographically South Gloucestershire would become isolated and increasingly susceptible to car cruise gatherings, leading to a likelihood of increased anti-social behaviour, road safety incidents and increasing demand on partner agencies. This is because our neighbouring authorities are either consulting on similar PSPOs or already have them in place. .*

The car cruising PSPO was subsequently implemented in South Gloucestershire in October 2024. However, there are also examples of local authorities that have implemented PSPOs in parts of England where no other local authorities have followed. Examples include:

- Hereford Council - implemented its PSPO in April 2022
- Eastbourne Borough Council - implemented its PSPO in September 2022
- North Somerset Council - implemented its PSPO in October 2023

The geographical implementation of PSPOs requires further investigation, which will require consistent data collection across England and Wales by police forces and local authorities working together.

## **Discussion**

At the end of 2024, there were 69 active PSPOs in England which included car cruising prohibitions, and these orders were created by 65 different local authorities across 26 police force areas. Car cruising PSPOs are a further example of new legislative provisions being used to prohibit and provide sanctions in relation to behaviours that are already criminalised, such as dangerous driving and speeding. Their civilianised implementation - PSPOs are designed and imposed by a local authority, and then enforceable by a range of policing bodies - devolves the prevention and enforcement of behaviours that were (and are) captured within primary legislation to the more subjectively defined and discretionarily enforced domain of ASB. Car cruising PSPOs duplicate more instances of primary legislation than other PSPOs that target behaviours associated with people experiencing street

homelessness. This raises important questions about why they are being developed and implemented in the first instance. We need to better understand why primary legislation is not perceived to be sufficient and/or appropriate to address car cruising behaviours, and why PSPOs are regarded as a better alternative. The PSPO provisions were not created to tackle car cruising. The latest government factsheet on ASB suggests PSPOs were designed to tackle environmental ASB, such as dog fouling and public drinking (GOV.UK, 2025), rather than nuisance which is how car cruising is categorised. Undoubtedly, PSPOs afford policing bodies the opportunity to take quicker and more discretionary action, which can be beneficial for victims and communities, but detrimental to offenders who cannot access the usual procedural safeguards. Detailed evaluation of the use car cruising PSPOs is required to assess whether their presence and/or enforcement solves the underlying problems associated with the behaviour, rather than sanctioning the symptoms of the problem, and/or displacing the car cruising activity. Understanding the experiences of those who engage in car cruising and the impact of any interactions with the criminal justice system must be part of this process. This work is particularly necessary as not all areas that experience car cruising have utilised, or continued to utilise, PSPOs. Birmingham City Council, Enfield Council,<sup>12</sup> as well as local authorities across the Black Country have secured Injunctions Against Persons Unknown, with power of arrest attached. Punishment for breach is more severe than a PSPO and constitutes contempt of court. If proven, perpetrators can face an unlimited fine, the seizure of assets, or imprisonment for up to two years. This approach also circumvents primary legislation and must be examined carefully to understand its effect/s and effectiveness.

PSPOs are predicated on an assumption that their imposition will act as a deterrent to whatever behaviours are prohibited within the order. Classic deterrence theory (Beccaria, 1872; Bentham, 1789; Hobbes, 1651) combines the risk, speed, and likelihood of being caught and experiencing a consequence but, to be an effective deterrent, public awareness is essential. Other than the mapping tools created as part of this research, there is no central repository of PSPOs. Unlike, for example, London's Ultra Low Emission Zone where specific rules apply, which is visible within Google Maps, and for which Transport for London provides a postcode checker to enable drivers to determine whether and when they will enter the zone. Clean Air Zones across England are also included within Google Maps, and alerts can be set to indicate to a driver when they cross into a zone. By contrast, it is probable that most drivers will have no idea whether and when they have entered a car cruising PSPO area. Some local authorities use signage, but this is inconsistent and, even where signs are present,

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<sup>12</sup> A car cruising PSPO that was implemented in early 2021 had expired before Enfield Council secured the injunction.



their utility relies on a driver taking a route within the PSPO area where a sign has been installed. It then requires the driver to see the sign, to understand what it means, and to know precisely what behaviours are included. The range and diversity of car cruising PSPO content and coverage, makes it difficult for drivers to make any assumptions unlike other road signage, such as those detailed in the Highway Code, where the meaning is consistent across the country. While some of the prohibited behaviours may constitute an offence regardless of the presence of a PSPO (e.g. vehicle racing on a public highway), other behaviours that are included within PSPOs may not necessarily be regarded as an offence under existing provisions (e.g. revving an engine). PSPOs provide an alternative and additional enforcement mechanism but, at present, the only way to determine the car cruising behaviours that are prohibited, and the locational scope of the prohibitions, is to find and read the relevant local authority PSPO.

Public awareness is perhaps less likely when a whole local authority area is covered. For example, South Norfolk District Council's authority-wide PSPO covers 351 square-miles (ONS, 2024). Allied to the size of the PSPO area are questions about proportionality and enforcement. Car cruising generally takes place in locations that support and enable specific behaviours, including car parks, industrial estates, certain residential streets, and open roads away from heavily populated areas, (Metropolitan Police, 2025). It is arguably disproportionate to place restrictions on whole local authority areas that encompass a mixture of urban, residential and rural geographies. For areas where car cruising does not take place, the PSPO does not reflect the harm that is likely to occur in the absence of prevention (Steiker, 2013), hence it is disproportionately preventive and exceeds the geography of the problem. Similarly, enforcement across such a large area is unlikely to be possible due to financial costs and officer resource limitations. These issues suggest that PSPO powers are being held in reserve just in case they need to be employed, a tactic we have seen elsewhere (Heap et al., 2022). The process and extent of car cruising PSPO enforcement, including local enforcement thresholds and the dynamics between police forces and local authorities, requires further attention to better understand how PSPOs operate in practice.

The specific displacement and diffusion effects of situationally specific preventive provisions, such as PSPOs, are difficult to map and quantify (Johnson et al. 2012). More detailed and consistent data collection is required to better understand the potential contagion and displacement effect/s of PSPOs, as well as the possible diffusion of benefits. For example, and aligned with Clarke and Weisburd's (1994) early assessment of the ways in which crime-control benefits can be diffused, the expansive geographical scope of some PSPOs combined with the lack of clarity regarding their specific

parameters could lead some potential nuisance drivers to be overly cautious with respect to their behaviours and/or to consider that it is not worth the effort required to find a location that is not covered by a PSPO. This presumes rational decision-making (Cornish & Clarke, 1987), which would, in turn, require sufficient knowledge and awareness of the PSPO provisions. For the local authorities within PSPO clusters, it is not clear whether those that implemented PSPOs later did so in response to a recorded increase in problematic car cruising behaviours following the imposition of PSPOs within contiguous locations, or whether it reflects a perceived risk of increased problems associated with displacement (as noted within the South Gloucestershire consultation documentation), and/or the hope of more general diffusion benefits.

## **Conclusion**

This paper provides a snapshot of car cruising-related PSPOs across England at the end of 2024, in terms of their location, nature, and reach. It creates an essential foundation and starting point for future inquiry that should explore the use and locational spread of these civil orders. It also adds to the growing body of work examining PSPOs and visually represents their coverage using mapping techniques for the first time. After over a decade of use, there is still scant information about the enforcement practices and the deterrent or preventive effects of PSPOs which, when used on the scale highlighted by our research, can affect millions of people. To improve awareness and understanding, a central repository of orders is required, alongside consistent data collection to detail how PSPOs are enforced, how breaches are recorded, as well as data related to other ASB powers, such as Injunctions Against Persons Unknown, Dispersal Orders, Community Protection Notices, Civil Injunctions, and Criminal Behaviour Orders. With reference to car cruising, these data should be collated alongside other ASB-related powers, such as Section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002. Together this would provide the tools necessary for a detailed evaluation of the effectiveness of these orders.

At the time of writing, the Crime and Policing Bill is progressing through the UK Parliament and proposes a raft of changes to how ASB is dealt with. One suggestion is to remove the necessity to provide a warning before vehicle seizure when enacting Section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002. Aside from there being an existing provision for vehicles to be seized without warning, this would remove a level of procedural fairness from police decision-making, which is particularly important when being used with the subjective ASB definition of alarm, distress or annoyance (Heap et al., 2025). This proposal demonstrates a further rolling-back of procedural rights, confirms that car cruising is on

the political agenda, and underlines the timeliness of this research and the urgency of continued scrutiny of car cruising PSPOs.

The research we have presented in this paper reinforces previous calls for greater accountability to be required to implement PSPOs (Heap et al. 2022; Archer, 2023; JUSTICE 2023). With reference to car cruising PSPOs, this must include measures related to the evidence and rationale needed to justify the implementation of a PSPO, and the standardisation of the renewal process, to include rigorous requirements, before an order can be continued or extended.

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**Data availability**

All data has been sourced from publicly available websites. A synthesis of key data used in this study is included as Supplementary Table 1.

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