

FOLLOW UP INSPECTION OF MODIFIED CELLULAR PRISONER STATION VAN [2 MAY 2007]

An inspection of the Cellular prisoner station van was undertaken by H&S advisors Liz Hoe and Gary Shepherd to follow up on the recommendations made by Julie Spark on the 29 July 2004. This was a new van, which incorporated modifications in response to these recommendations and those following the incident to a detainee where his finger was severed when trapped in the rear door of the caged cell area on 25 June 2005. (DPS prevention team 24/05 refers)

1.0 Cell Design

The cell is designed as an “un-boltable cassette” which is potentially replaceable in each Ford Transit van in the Met fleet should it be required. The floor is covered in non-porous textured non-slip coating and there are two bench seats within a caged area, which is encased with Perspex sheeting to prevent prisoners spitting etc at detaining officers. Issues had been raised previously with the integrity of the Perspex sheeting and as a result, it has been mounted more securely with increased rivets. The sealant used has been replaced with a low strength/high adhesion formula. Potential ligatures/points of self-harm have also been considered.

2.0 Issues

New Hinged door design – the inner cell cage door has been redesigned to allow a gap of approximately 2cm to prevent entrapment/amputation of fingers/hands when the door is closed. The door has been designed to withstand physical force against it but it was recommended that this is checked on a regular basis as part of the local inspection regime to ensure it retains its physical integrity.

Perspex sheeting – this is now fitted to avoid potential ligature points and an increased number of bolts and rivets have been added. Where it is cut/damaged the integrity is reduced and again it was recommended that this is checked on a regular basis as part of the local inspection regime. Where damage is identified it should be either rectified immediately or the vehicle taken out of service.

Potential ligature points – wherever possible these have been eliminated and other potential gaps between walls/floors and ceiling have been filled with sealant. The initial report raised concerns about the size of the air vent grilles and recommended that they should not be greater than 2mm in diameter. The new van has a ceiling vent with circular vent holes about 5mm in size. I was advised that this was the smallest possible size, due to the surface area of the fan, to still provide an adequate airflow. Due to the containment of this area, the likelihood of a detainee being cuffed and the requirement in the SOP that detainees are not left unattended controls were in place to mitigate this risk.

Replacement sealant – a new sealant has been used to fill gaps (see above). Previously this was capable of being removed easily in large strips, which had the potential to be utilised as a ligature for self-harming. The replacement sealant could be removed with sharp fingernails but only in small 0.5cm (maximum) pieces. It was chosen due to its high adhesive qualities but

low strength i.e. in strips it would not be strong enough to aid strangulation. The risk of a detainee swallowing it in pieces has not been eliminated however it is greatly reduced. The recommendation was that a data sheet should be provided and a COSHH assessment completed if necessary in order to fully assess this potential risk.

Inspection regime by the service contractor – a maintenance regime is to be undertaken by the vehicle service contractor. This is not currently subject to predetermined intervals but in reality would be approximately every 6-8 weeks when the vans are subject to repair/servicing. It was recommended that guidelines are provided to the contractor as to what this maintenance/inspection regime should cover as a minimum i.e. the integrity of the hinges, damage to the Perspex sheeting and other areas.

Non slip floor covering – the new floor surfacing was a bulged 'non porous' coating which it was felt may prove difficult to clean but eliminates the slip/trip hazard should the floor become wet.

Rear vehicle step – this is often the cause of officer injury (particularly to the lower leg area when assisting a detainee into the vehicle) and the possibility of adding a protective rubber strip was addressed. It was also noted that this is the area most often damaged on vans and any damage to the metal structure which may increase the risk of injury should be noted and reported via the local inspection regime (see below).

3.0 Follow up actions should the new design be rolled out Pan Boroughs

TSD – Provide COSHH data sheet to S&HRMT for review and disseminate risk information to all TP Pan London if appropriate.

TP via S&HRMT – inform all BOCUs that officers should be briefed on the following:

- Advised of the new door opening mechanism
- All detainees must be searched to ensure they are not carrying items that could cause physical harm either to themselves/Met Officers or Met property
- Where, due to circumstances beyond their control officers are unable to search a detainee prior to being placed in the station van, they should be cuffed
- All station vans should be subject to regular local inspections and all defects noted and rectified promptly
- If a cellular prisoner station van is found to be damaged it should either be rectified prior to use or taken out of service
- No detainees should be left unattended (see SOP)
- In the event of a detainee swallowing sealant the precautions that should be taken by officers as appropriate (TBC on basis of a COSHH data sheet)