



Vehicle Identification Group

<https://www.cranfield.ac.uk/centres/centre-for-computational-engineering-sciences/vehicle-identification-group>

Dear Sarah,

30 May 2025

Ghost Plates Panel Event – House of Commons 3 June 2025

We write further to our previous meeting and correspondence, in advance of your planned event for 3 June.

Legal and legible vehicle registration plates are fundamental to many of the government's strategic priorities. Tax collection, emission targets, the suppression of organised crime, control of illegal immigration and tracking of offenders all rely on what one of our group, when he was the Surveillance Camera Commissioner, termed the 'humble number plate'.

The UK's Automated Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) system quietly enables mission critical activities across government departments, from the safe transport of nuclear materials to the enforcement of customs tariffs and vehicle excise duty; tackling fraudulent benefit claims and rogue traders; from ensuring roadworthiness, driver safety and standards in food delivery, schools and wider passenger and goods transport management to the support of health emergencies and pandemics, major incidents, civil contingencies, criminal intelligence and national security. It is no exaggeration to say that ANPR has become part of the country's critical national infrastructure- and that system is entirely dependent on vehicle registration plates.

While members of our group have publicly highlighted the absurdity of relying on a piece of plastic displayed on the exterior of a vehicle in an AI-ambitious digital economy, nevertheless, number plates are all we currently have so we should take much more care with them.

Given their importance, it would be reasonable to expect number plates to be governed by a comprehensive, consistent and coherent framework regulating their manufacture and supply. Unfortunately, despite many public reports and an abundance of evidence as to its shortcomings, the framework for vehicle registration plates is wholly inadequate.

It therefore remains our firm view that the current arrangements for the supply and regulation of number plates represent a significant enduring risk, not only to policing and road safety, but also to the critical infrastructure of the country.

At our meeting with you on 4 February, we were pleased to be able to present the clear evidence behind this conclusion, providing local examples of extensive criminal use of illegal licence plates within the police area covering your constituency which is by no means atypical. Those examples included:

- The fact that anyone can become a DVLA Registered Number Plate Scheme (RNPS) member on payment of £40. There is no vetting, no trading history requirement and no monitoring of members' practices. We found 10 who were prepared to make cloned plates mapped around West Bromwich alone.
- To date we have identified over 135 DVLA registered RNPS members nationally who were prepared to make cloned plates and there will undoubtedly be more.
- The example of one West Midlands criminal who had recently supplied over 7,000 plates to the criminal underworld.

We also provided a chronology of the efforts that have been made to improve the wider situation around vehicle identification – including by parliamentary committee and two successive Surveillance Camera Commissioners. On any view, it is plain that decades of industry self-regulation have not worked and, for your reference, we attach a schedule summarising the key issues, reports and proposals for reform.

The availability and use of ghost plates will be an important part of any such reform, but this is only one of many shortcomings within the current arrangements governing vehicle identification. Because the risks from the status quo are systemic, any meaningful remedial action must address them all. We very much welcome the invitation to your forthcoming meeting at which we will be glad to answer any further questions that you or other invitees may have.

We feel bound to point out that, while the undeniable deficiencies of number plate regulation and associated risks have been a matter of public record for some time, the response of those bodies having responsibility for this area has been lamentable. We sincerely hope that your intervention now paves the way for the serious and systemic review of vehicle identification that the subject urgently demands and we stand ready to assist the government in that endeavour.

Yours sincerely

Professor Fraser Sampson

Dr Stuart Barnes

Dr Robert Gurney

Professor William Martin,

Dr Michael Rhead

Angus Hone

Tony Porter