

Research briefing: Using Public Spaces Protection Orders to put the brakes on car cruising

The issue

Public Spaces Protection Orders (PSPOs) are used by local authorities in England and Wales to prohibit and/or require specific behaviours in geographically restricted spaces. Increasingly, PSPOs are being used to tackle 'car cruising', which includes behaviours such as street racing, revving engines, performing stunts and playing loud music. PSPOs are civil preventive orders, which become criminal upon breach, with sanctions ranging from a £100 (soon to be £500) fixed penalty notice (FPN) to a fine of £1000 on conviction.

Our research takes stock of how PSPOs are being used to tackle car cruising in England and Wales. We concentrate on three aspects, while also mapping the locations of these restrictions (maps are provided in the Appendix):

1. The number of car cruising PSPOs and the extent of their use
2. The types of behaviours restricted by car cruising PSPOs
3. How car cruising PSPOs have been publicised, enforced and renewed in different locations

This research is timely and significant because PSPOs were not designed to tackle car cruising. They are being utilised for this purpose despite a range of existing primary legislation (e.g. the Road Traffic Act 1988 and Section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002). PSPOs afford policing bodies greater discretion to intervene at a lower behavioural threshold and, due to the civil nature of the power, offenders are not protected by the procedural safeguards associated with criminal offending. As there are already widespread concerns about the (dis)proportionate use of PSPOs, discerning how they are being implemented in this new context is important. The need for greater understanding is further underlined by the lack of official data about the extent of car cruising, the sanctions imposed to address it, and the absence of oversight and scrutiny of PSPOs more generally.

The data

Desk-based research was conducted between October and December 2024 to create a database of car cruising PSPOs in England and Wales. As PSPOs must be published on local authority websites, a systematic search for car cruising PSPOs was conducted for the 317 local authorities in England and 22 in Wales. No active car cruising PSPOs were found in Wales, therefore this research applies to England only. The database includes information about the PSPO issuing date, whether it has been renewed (and when), the geographical coverage of the order (e.g. whole local authority or specific restricted area/s), the type of order (e.g. stand-alone car cruising order or part of a broader PSPO), and details of the specific prohibitions/requirements.

Key findings

1. The extent of car cruising PSPOs

- There were 69 active car cruising PSPOs in England at the point of data finalisation [see Appendix 1, Figure 1].
- The active car cruising PSPOs were implemented by 65 different local authorities, in 26 police force areas.
- Consultations were underway in a further eight local authorities during our data collection period.
- Of the active PSPOs, 46 were in their first iteration, 23 renewed or extended previous orders.
- The majority of PSPOs were implemented in 2022 and 2023, highlighting an uptick in use over the past three years.
- Political governance of the local authority and PCC had no discernible impact on the decision to implement PSPOs.
- When considering geographical scope, 31 PSPOs covered the whole local authority area, and 38 were confined to one or more specified restricted areas (e.g. designated streets or neighbourhoods) [see Appendix 2, Figure 2].
- 49 of the PSPOs were solely focused on car cruising, which we refer to as 'stand-alone' car cruising PSPOs. The remaining 20 PSPOs contained one or more car cruising-related prohibitions but were part of wider 'town centre' PSPOs, which covered other behaviours, such as street drinking or littering [see Appendix 3, Figure 3].
- Between 2018-2024, there is no clear or predictable pattern regarding the location or locational progression of car cruising PSPOs [see Appendix 1, Figures 4-7].
- There is evidence of locational clustering, with contiguous jurisdictions implementing PSPOs following implementation by an initial local authority. Examples include Yorkshire and surrounding areas, the East Midlands, the South East, and North West [see Appendix 1, Figures 4-7].

2. The restrictions contained in car cruising PSPOs

- The 49 stand-alone PSPOs were analysed to identify how car cruising was conceptualised; all but two of the orders comprised different restrictions.
- 41 different behaviours were identified, but a core set of six featured heavily:
 - Performing stunts using motor vehicles: including drifting, performing doughnuts, skidding, handbrake turns, and wheel spinning; and the racing of motor vehicles
 - Causing excessive noise, including causing or allowing loud music to be played from a vehicle or a portable device to cause a nuisance
 - Sounding horns other than in accordance with the Highway Code
 - Revving of engines to cause a nuisance
 - Causing obstruction on the highway, whether moving or stationary, including driving in convoy
 - Using foul, threatening, intimidating or abusive language (4 areas included sexual language/suggestions)
- Many restrictions duplicated behaviours that are already against the law (e.g. the Road Traffic Act 1988, the Highways Act 1980, the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984). This demonstrates a 'layering' of powers within the PSPO areas, which we have seen with non-car cruising PSPOs.
- Two PSPOs stated that no person shall commit 'any traffic offence covered by legislation', which captures the full extent of the breadth afforded through PSPO powers.
- 26 PSPOs had prohibitions related to excessive speed. This duplication of existing legislation 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.
- 17 PSPOs contained generic requirements that prohibit any ASB or nuisance, which widens the scope of the order and disproportionately pre-empt risk.
- A range of non-car cruising behaviours were included in the PSPOs, reflecting the conceptualisation of nuisance associated with car cruising, such as loitering, littering, and urination/defecation.
- Two PSPOs contained dispersal requirements, necessitating individuals to leave the area and not return for 24-hours. This replicates Dispersal Order powers and bypasses the senior police authorisation necessary for such behavioural restrictions, demonstrating further overreach of the powers.

3. Publicity, enforcement and renewal

- There is no clear record of PSPO enforcement activities; monitoring and data sharing practices are inconsistent.
- The substantial size of whole local authority area PSPOs brings into question the ability of policing bodies to consistently enforce the power.
- Community awareness of local car cruising PSPOs is unknown, with varying examples of signage.
- Consultation documents to renew car cruising PSPOs vary in detail considerably. Where data are available, online survey public consultations with majoritarian perspectives are given precedence.

Research and policy implications

- Car cruising PSPOs duplicate more instances of primary legislation than other types of PSPOs previously studied. 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.
- PSPOs are not the only power being used to address car cruising. Three areas (Birmingham City Council, Enfield Council, and local authorities across the Black Country) have secured Injunctions Against Persons Unknown. This approach also circumvents primary legislation and must be examined carefully to understand its effect/s and effectiveness.
- Detailed evaluation of the use of 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.
- The process and extent of car cruising PSPO enforcement, including local enforcement thresholds and the dynamics between police forces and local authorities, requires further examination to better understand how PSPOs operate in practice.
- 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.
- To improve awareness and understanding of PSPO powers, 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 and primary legislation related to car cruising.

Link to the published research

The peer reviewed journal article upon which this briefing is based is available open access from [Policing and Society](#).

Using this material

The materials and data included in this briefing and appendices are available for re-use only with clear attribution back to the published article:

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Appendix

Appendix 1

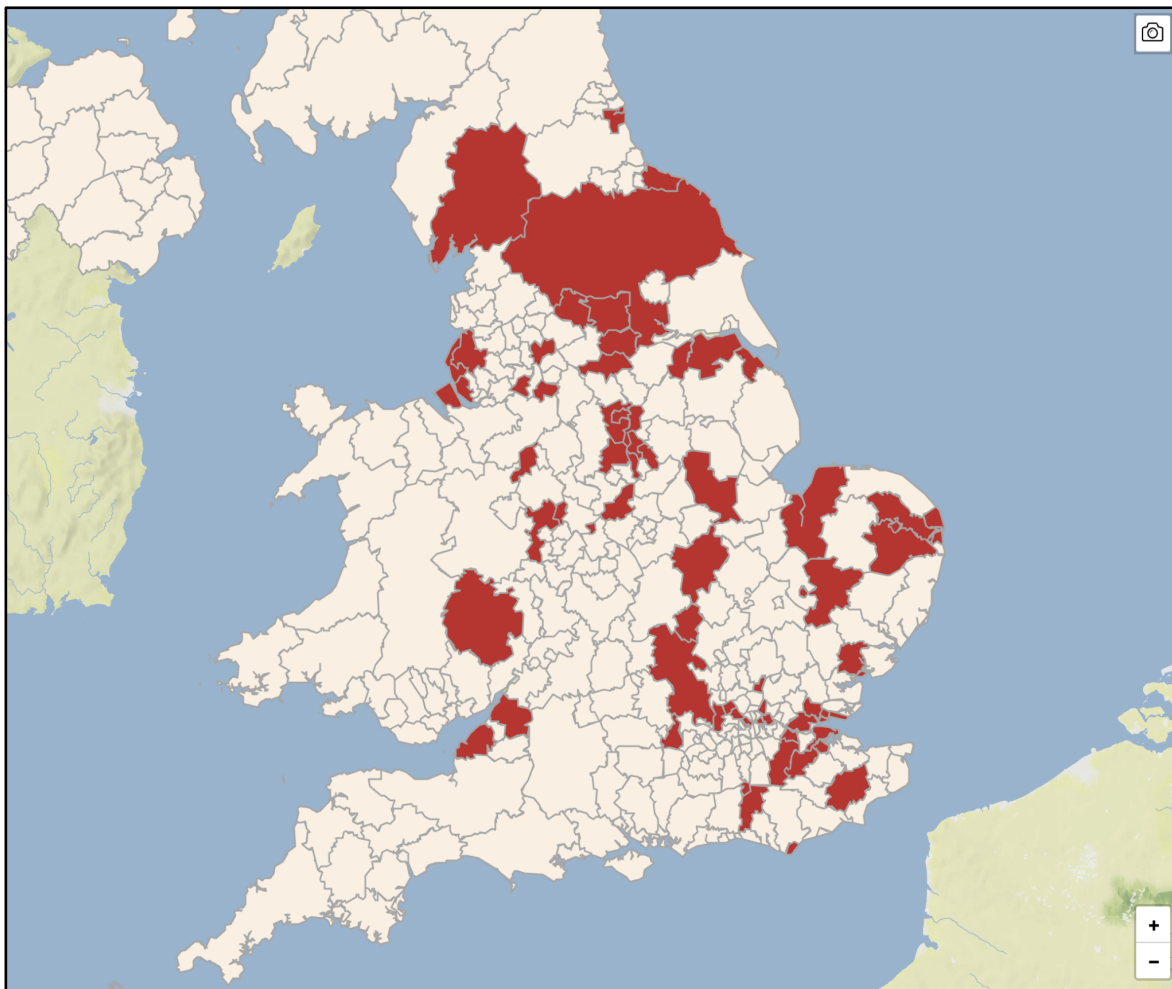


Figure 1: Local authorities with approved/active PSPOs @ end 2024

Appendix 2

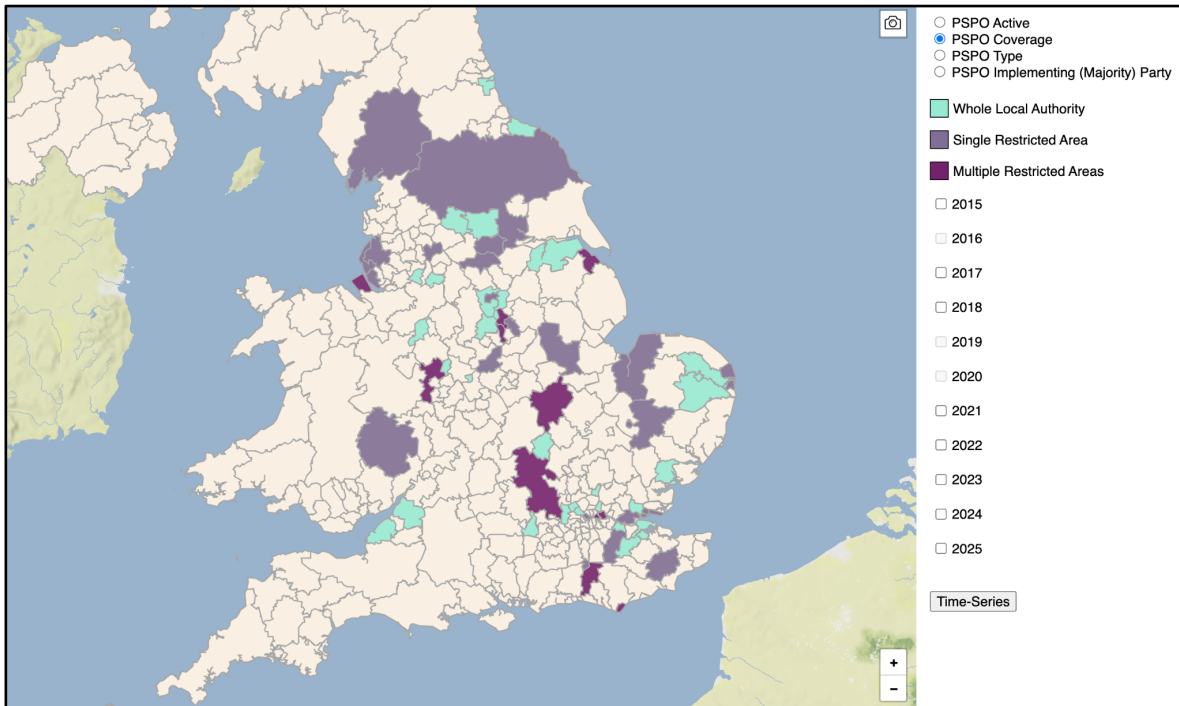


Figure 2: PSPO coverage: whole local authority and restricted area/s within local authorities (active/approved PSPOs @ end 2024)

Appendix 3

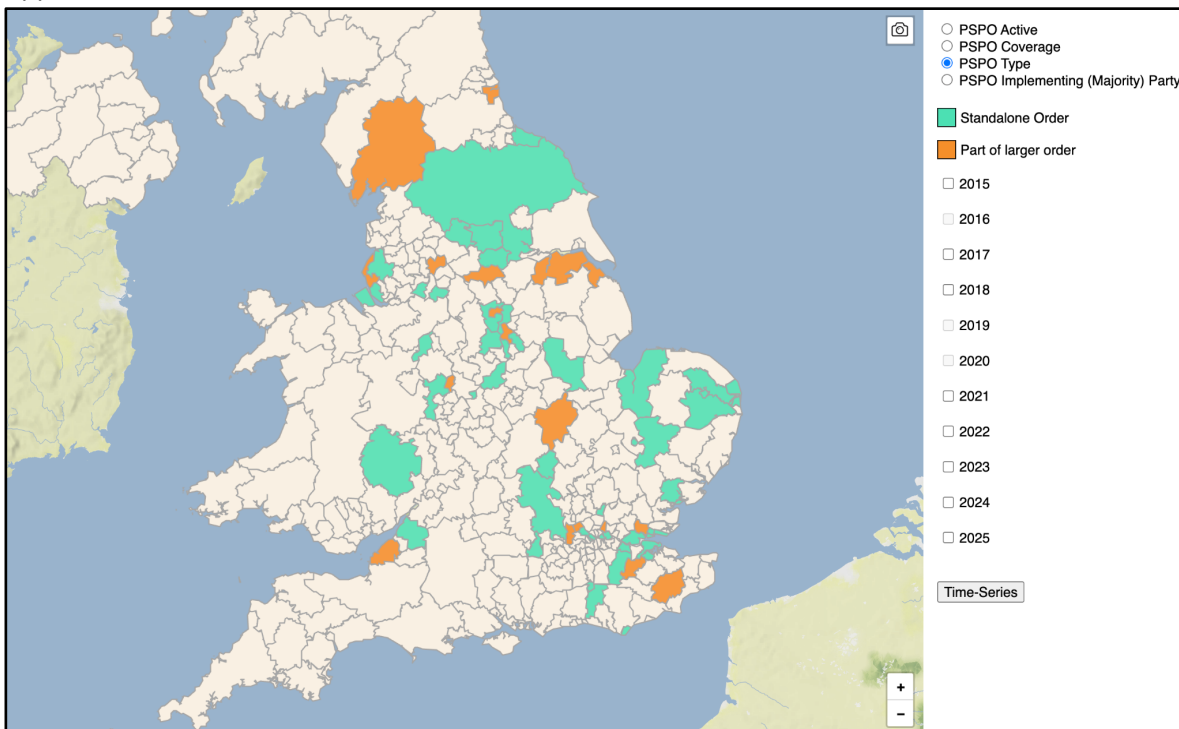


Figure 3: PSPO type: standalone car cruising PSPOs and multi-component PSPOs (active/approved PSPOs @ end 2024)

Appendix 4

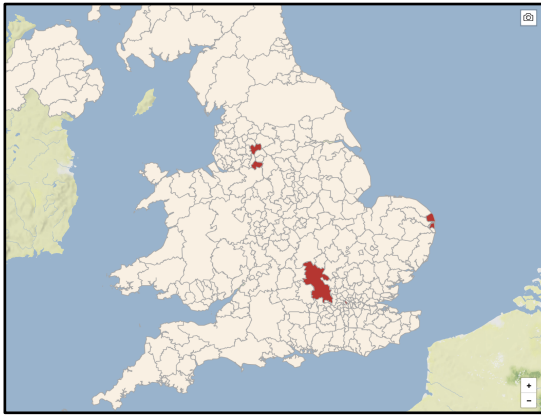


Figure 4: Active PSPOs @ end 2018

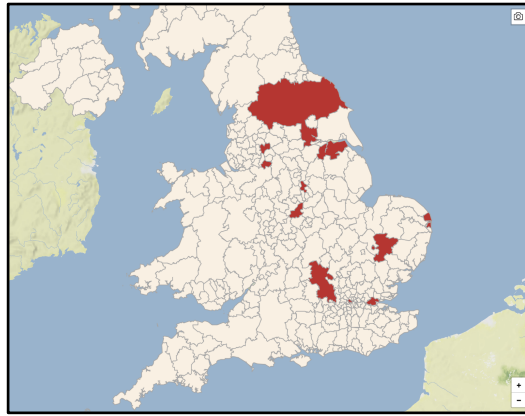


Figure 5: Active PSPOs @ end 2021

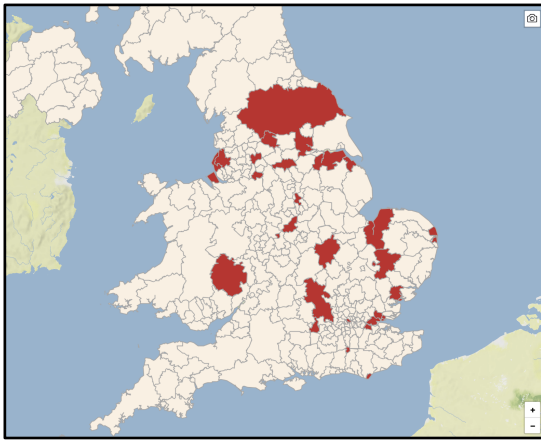


Figure 6: Active PSPOs @ end 2022

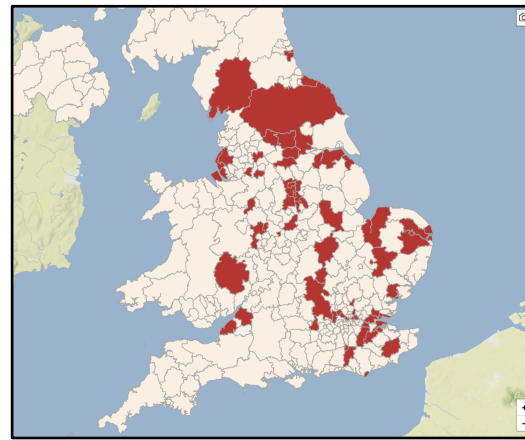


Figure 7: Active/Approved PSPOs @ end 2024