

LEARNING THE LESSONS

Quick time bulletin 3 October 2009

Abnormal loads

Key issue

The need to ensure abnormal loads are legally transported and, where appropriate, escorted by the police

Background

A haulage company wanted to transport a large dockside crane across the country. They notified the abnormal loads office of the local Force, which decided a police escort was needed for the beginning of the journey, with a private escort taking over after that.

The load was classified as abnormal under the relevant legislation and it was illegal for it to travel without being properly marked and lit. Force policy on the authorisation and movement of abnormal loads was sparse, however. It did not refer to the legislation or the nature of the road network in the county, nor did it allocate ownership of roles and responsibilities or include any guidelines on night time movements within the county. When authorising the load, the abnormal loads office relied upon the information provided to them by the haulier and no discussion took place on how the load should be lit and marked.

Before dawn a few days later, transport of the load on a truck began. The Force had not ensured that all traffic patrol officers had attended the relevant training course before undertaking abnormal load escort duties. Accordingly, the traffic officers escorting the load were aware of their powers but were unaware of the legal requirement to place reflective markers on the extremities of the load. Indeed, there was no knowledge within the Force traffic department as to what made an abnormal load illegal; nor did any one person or department within the Force have ownership of this particular aspect of abnormal load movement, which was the case nationally as well as for this Force.

While the load was travelling along a main road after the private escort had taken over, a man driving to work collided with the offside of the crane. He died of his injuries. When police officers arrived at the scene they found that the required reflective markers were in the cab of the truck and not on the extremities of the load as required by law.

Local Quick time learning

1. Traffic officers involved in abnormal load movement should be suitably trained at an early stage.
2. Roles and responsibilities within the Force for the authorisation and movement of loads need to be clear.
3. Escorting officers should have all relevant paperwork in advance in order to assess the risks of the move before travelling.
4. In all cases, where it is deemed safe to transport an abnormal load at night, a police escort should be attached to the load until it is either out of the county or travelling on a dual carriageway/motorway suitable for its size.

5. For daytime movements the Force's traffic department and abnormal loads department should jointly carry out a risk assessment to establish whether a police escort is required.

The Force revised its Escorting Abnormal Loads Policy in September 2008 and the issues identified have been taken into account. Hours of darkness movements are now prohibited in normal circumstances unless a police escort is provided, for which the haulier must make payment. Any deviation from this policy must be authorised at senior level within the Operations Division. The IPCC supports this policy; it is particularly relevant where the county road network has few large lit roads and dual carriageways or motorways.

Learning at the national level

The incident gave rise to recommendations to national bodies - the first by the IPCC to ACPO and the remainder by the Coroner to the Department of Transport:

- ACPO should issue guidance to address the issue of signage and lighting of abnormal loads at a national level. ACPO is currently drafting a national policy to tackle this.
- Projection markings should be made of a reflective material so they would be perceived at a greater distance in the hours of darkness.
- Consider whether fitting amber warning beacons to a vehicle carrying an abnormal load should be made compulsory.
- Strengthen the Highway Code to advise an oncoming driver seeing an escort vehicle operating amber lights to slow down and move to the nearside as safely as possible or, where the abnormal load vehicle is in view, to consider the need to stop to await its arrival, or proceed very slowly as it may occupy considerably more road width than other vehicles.

The Department of Transport is reviewing the need for further legislation and will look at strengthening the Highway Code when the next opportunity arises.

***For more information on the case read the IPCC learning report at:
http://www.learningthelessons.org.uk/quicktime_bulletin_3_learning_report.pdf***

Quick time bulletin 3

August 2009

Abnormal loads

Learning the Lessons quick time bulletins are designed to disseminate learning identified in the course of conduct investigations that is too urgent to await the end of the investigation or lessons from an investigation that need to be disseminated urgently. Such investigations are carried out by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) or by police forces, the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) or Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC).

This bulletin is issued by an inter-agency forum called the Learning the Lessons Committee. Its members are:

- Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO)
- Association of Police Authorities (APA)
- HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC)
- The Home Office
- Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC)
- National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA)
- The Police Federation

You can access published bulletins on the Learning the Lessons Committee website at www.learningthelessons.org.uk

If you have any enquiries about the Learning the Lessons Committee or the contents of this bulletin, please contact the IPCC on learning@ipcc.gsi.gov.uk