

'Road Safety 2014: Creating Safer Roads for All'

This headline caught my eye when our secretary canvassed for interest. The Government were planning a full-day event on 25th February 2014 with keynote speakers from Central Government & Transport for London, policy advisors to the Government on Insurance and Drink & Drugs, and various local Government speakers. *I wanted to find out what the government has been doing to make our roads safer, and what it plans to do in the future, to further improve safety of road users.*

In addition to the keynotes, representatives from our local authorities gave case studies on Rural Roads, Urban / Town & City, Emergency Services, providing a broad cross-section, demonstrated on how they plan to reach out to communities and form partnerships, and two commercial organisations gave presentations on new toxicology products and a safety system to enable cyclists to become more 'visible' to larger vehicle drivers (HGV, LGV, BUS etc). *As a Leeds (City) driving instructor I felt it would be very interesting to see how each local authority service provider perceived their road systems and infrastructure for their demographic, and what differences there may be.*

Department for Transport (DfT).

Two useful online references were introduced by DfT – “**English Road Safety Comparison**” and “**Road Safety Observatory**” – these two very useful sites can easily be ‘Googled’, and provide a wealth of information for driving professionals, particularly ADI’s. Find out here about local, regional and national road safety issues, accident blackspots. There was a promise that fixed penalty notices are changing (increasing). The Green Paper on Young Driver Safety was mentioned, but disappointingly, it was clear this has been moved into the political “long grass” until after the next General Election. New legislation is progressing in Parliament to remove the ‘statutory option’ on Drink Driving, and for both alcohol & drugs, new portable evidential testing equipment is soon to be available. Drug limitation definitions for some specific drugs are being introduced to strengthen the new Drug Driving Offence, all of which is programmed to be delivered in law and practice during 2014. A number of other more minor programmes were discussed, the most significant be the new driver licence, agreements with Motor Insurance Bureau (MIB) and research into 20mph (more of that later). Government policy and strategic thinking tends to be determined by statistics such as...

KSI’s are reducing, even though traffic volumes are raising and nos. overall declined year-on-year since 2007. DfT say they don’t know why there is a decline, they felt the following factors might be contributory – improved vehicle technology; people driving slower; fewer young men driving; people go out less in bad weather – what do you think?

Drink driving is on the rise, where there is a suggestion that offences bottomed out in 2010 and are now increasing again. Worse still the cyclists accidents are significantly rose since 2011, and are expected to spike further when the recent spate of accidents in London are included. DfT believe there is a correlation with an increase in overall population of cyclists, particularly in the Capital.

60% of vehicle occupant deaths are in CARS, 25% motorbikes, 9% pushbikes, the remaining <6% being large vehicles, the latter is about 20% of all road users. Statistically motorbikes & pushbikes each represent only about 1% of all traffic volume, but each have too many fatal accidents. And worse still, in 2012, 24% of victims of all fatalities in road accidents were on foot.

By age group, if you analyse the 17-25 group, KSI's rise from age 17 to peak at age 18, then fall away gradually, with some slight off-trend peaks at 30/31, 50, then about every 5 years there's an isolated peak, and a slight general upward trend after age 72, but, in part attributable to pedestrian KSI's. However, the younger group achieve their notoriety for KSI's while driving about 2,000 miles per year, compared with more than twice the distance driven by their 25+ year old contemporaries.

Association of British Insurers (ABI).

The insurance presenter spoke immediately following the DfT speaker. The first message was that ABI feels there has been "too much tinkering around the edges" – a very direct statement aimed clearly and directly at the current and previous Governments for failing to deal with the contentious issue of Young Drivers. It was clear ABI are satisfied to charge exceptional high premiums to young drivers for as long as new, more imaginative legislation fails to be implemented to truly address the issues. ABI wants GRADUATED LICENCES, TELEMATICS RESEARCH & DEPLOYMENT (if practicable), and does not believe that GDL and Telematics are mutually exclusive. ABI supports new technologies and believes that "autonomous cars" (thinking, feeling, sensing), are a future that will benefit Road Safety, such as autonomous emergency braking (AEB). **"Thanks to research conducted for the UK insurers by Thatcham, the insurance Group rating of a vehicle with AEB could now be reduced by up to five groups".**

Alcohol & Drug Taking and Driving.

Recently DfT has rejected lower drink-drive limit. There is ongoing consultation on abolition of "statutory option", removal of legal need for preliminary breath test, and allow registered health care professionals (eg nurses in Police Stations) to take blood samples in drink & drug driving cases. Newly developed evidential testing equipment available at the roadside before end 2014 for alcohol and drugs. Consultation on Scottish Law with aim to reduce legal limits and bring more into line with English Law limits. Further more stringent reductions in Northern Ireland, and expectation of a new drink drive regime in NI by 2016. There is now new legislation "Crime and Courts Act 2013, s 56, stating a new offence of being in charge of a motor vehicle with a specified controlled drug in the body, at a level in excess of the specified limit for that drug." Work is ongoing to define unsafe limits for individual drugs to complement the law in respect of what is a "safe specified limit for that drug". Most illegal drugs will be rated as <zero tolerance>, but much attention is being given to prescribed drugs and counter-top medications, partly for themselves, but also because they may mask the consumption of illegal drugs.

Following an interval a number of presenters representing their towns or cities each gave a case study of the challenges facing their own environment. It was interesting to see the wide variations between the Capital, a Rural area, a compact busy town/city and a Metropolitan area. The day was finalised by a presentation from the secretary of the Association of Industrial Road Safety Officers.

Unique differences.

London has developed a "Road Safety Steering Group" to co-ordinate its Safety Plan to 2020. Statistically pedestrians and cyclists have been experiencing much greater serious injuries / deaths over the last decade, and motorcyclists have exponentially risen in minor injuries, possibly with the increasing population of despatch & delivery riders in the City. TfL was not convincing as to how it got Road Safety messages out to general public of road users.

In Rural North Yorkshire, although the organisation was still driven by statistics, there is clear evidence of meaningful educational initiatives for all ages, from infants to seniors, in the education programme and extracurricular. They have a “95 Alive” online awareness programme (Google this), including an ENHANCED PASSPLUS SCHEME for ADI’s, with features for all age ranges and a special case of “Bikers” as the rural roads in their network are an attractive magnet for motorcycle sport enthusiasts – so they unfortunately have a higher than average KSI in this road user category.

Brighton & Hove City Council has a stated aim to become the first 20mph City. There is a belief that road users are generally fallible and no matter what technologies and new ideas are implemented, an accident will result in damage that is proportionate to the impact speed. Cut the speed and you cut the damage. Advanced technologies currently in use include Speed Activated Signs, Average Speed Cameras on non-20mph roads, Countdown Signals at Pedestrian Crossings and Advance Cyclist Green Signals. In the centres, goods vehicles are permitted onto dedicated off-road areas so as not to impede traffic flow.

At Rochdale Borough Council the Road Safety Team have set their own objectives as they believe the Government have failed to issue any road safety targets. Rochdale achieved one of the lowest casualty rates in the country in 2012. A major road route in the centre linking several dual carriageways by large roundabouts was redesigned with traffic lights and cut 56 KSI’s over the prior 3 years to 20 KSI’s following the changes over the following 5 years. Rochdale was seen to be very proactive in education and media publications with vibrant and striking leaflets and posters.

Airso advice is that of all road miles driven each year, 25% are for work purposes, and 1 in 3 of drivers at work will be involved in a collision each year. There are many supporting stats that clearly show that people who drive as part of their job significantly increase risk of being killed or seriously injured than those who drive just for pleasure. Companies / employers have legal obligations to ensure their employee(s) / drivers and vehicles are fit for purpose, as the drivers are also each singularly responsible for themselves and their vehicles. Just because a company might employ a driver who uses their own vehicle does not mean the company is less responsible in law.

My Conclusions.

Government have put in place some easy fixes and useful tools, but have shied away from the more difficult (politically-charged) things like the Green Paper and funding well thought through accident reduction initiatives in the provinces. Insurance companies are not impressed with the lightweight approach to the problem posed by Young Drivers, but are strong supporters of new and innovative technologies and education. Penalties for general driving offences are becoming more stringent and new laws and technologies to assist authorities secure conviction of driving with intoxicants will soon be in place. All Government institutions are statistically driven, but how they interpret and deal with problems local to them are fundamentally different and unique to them. That said, we can all learn from other people, so I have arranged for all the presentations to be available at our website.