

NEW AGENDA

the bulletin of the Road Danger Reduction Forum

Issue 10 April 2000

No Change - No Vision

Business as usual in the new Road Safety Strategy

In common with other road safety campaigning groups, the Road Danger Reduction Forum (RDRF) is dismayed by the lack of vision and leadership in the Government's new road safety strategy. The only coherent theme running through the document is the constant repetition of the dubious claim that Britain has an excellent road safety record. This generates unjustified and dangerous complacency amongst Britain's motorists.

Fundamental shift

We believe that the DETR needs to make a fundamental shift to a new agenda based on reducing danger at source which links road safety to wider sustainable transport objectives.

The claim to a good road safety record is based on the fall in reported fatal and serious injuries on our roads.

Overall casualty numbers have, however, changed little in the last forty years (in fact slight injuries have significantly increased). This

can be explained by numerous factors including superior medical care.

Crashworthy cars

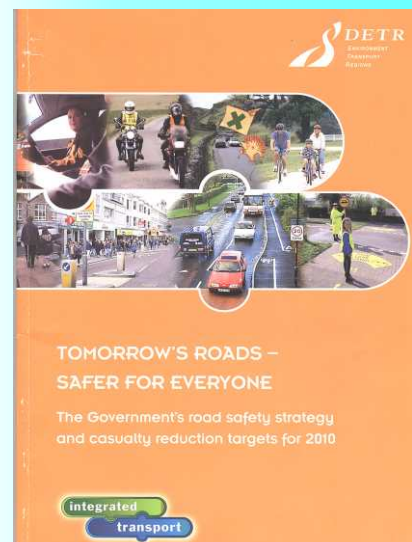
More important, fear of increasing danger from more motor vehicles has driven pedestrians and cyclists off our roads, some into ever more crashworthy cars where they have more crashes but are less likely to be seriously injured.

As our record for child pedestrian casualties (and other indicators such as insurance claims) shows, for those who choose or have no choice but to walk and cycle the road environment is now often no less - or more - dangerous.

The hidden casualties from the environmental destruction and the sedentary lifestyles these changes have caused will far outweigh any road casualty savings.

The Forum along with all rational observers knows that the only way to really increase safety on our roads is through a complete change in the culture of

The government produced its new road safety strategy "Tomorrow's Roads Safer for Everyone" on 1st March. This special issue of New Agenda is given over to consideration of this new strategy and its implications for our members. We intend to continue to campaign for a genuine road danger reduction strategy. Any comments about the issues raised in this edition will be welcomed.



Road Safety Strategy Special Issue

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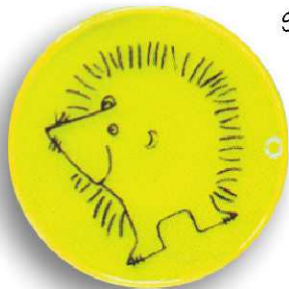
Safer for Children?

This section of the strategy begins well, stating that “Children should be able to walk and cycle in safety”. But then it proceeds to demonstrate a confusion about what this really means.

Clearly the penny still hasn't dropped in the road safety division at the DETR as to the definition of real safety.

Reduce the impact

There is a recognition that when it comes to engineering, the measures that assist children are those which reduce the impact of motor traffic. More safe routes to schools, 20 mph zones and Home Zones will be very welcome... as would the money to introduce them.



Taught to behave

However, when the strategy discusses education and training of children it shows that the leopard hasn't changed its spots.

Children are still the problem. They must be taught to behave at crossings and to wear proper clothing and helmets.

Cyclist and pedestrian training are there to help children cope with a bad

environment, not to encourage them to walk and cycle more.

Wafer thin

Those who attended the Forum's “Gearing Up For Cycling” conference in December, will be well aware of the absence of a DETR speaker or delegate.

This shows how wafer thin the department's commitment to make cycle training more widely available really is (paragraph 2.27).

Walking buses

A section on “Travel To School” does give a run out to walking buses, car sharing and school travel plans, but it is still very weak. The fear of rising casualty figures still seems to loom large over the pages hindering a real commitment to exorcise the demon driver.

Where the whole document and this section in particular is lacking is in the recognition of the need to deconstruct car culture.

Safer environment

This begins with the education of children, helping them to recognise they have a right to demand a safer more sustainable environment and giving them the understanding to make

responsible travel choices.

Resources

Road Safety Officers have been rapidly producing resources to enable such work to be integrated within the curriculum, a fact of which the DETR seem totally unaware.



*“ The leopard hasn't changed it's spots...
...children are still the problem ”*

The Government seems unable to act on its own recommendations where traffic speed is concerned.







The findings of its speed review acknowledge that tackling speed is key to cutting casualties.

Even the Prime Minister, Tony Blair in his speech at the launch claimed that 'controlling speed is at the heart of our strategy'. Yet the Government has backed away from really tackling the culture of speed head on.

Piecemeal basis

Instead of taking a lead on this issue and lowering national speed limits, the Review does little except encourage local authorities to do it on a piecemeal basis.

Key points include:

-  No national changes in limits
-  Encouraging more 20mph zones
-  More traffic calming around schools
-  Working toward 30mph in villages
-  More use of speed cameras
-  Increased fixed penalties and a review of traffic offences

This 'bottling out' by

Government on such an important road safety issue represents a serious missed opportunity.

Costly

Tackling speed on such a piecemeal basis will be slow and costly to local authorities who will have to consult on a scheme by scheme basis

In the mean time lives will continue to be lost that might have been saved by a more straightforward change in the national limits. It may also cause confusion to drivers and vulnerable users.

What most road users want is consistency in speed limits and enforcement of those limits.

No encouragement

The document promises further advice on good practice and on the development of a road hierarchy. We hope it is forthcoming more quickly than the strategy itself.

We support the increase in the use of speed cameras and hypothecated revenues (although there was no encouragement for the use of on board speed limiters).

Stronger message

We await the findings of the Home Office report on driving offences, which could and should send much stronger messages to drivers about

the unacceptable culture of speeding.

But meanwhile the Governments' proposals offer little to encourage walking and cycling in confidence.

“ Even Tony Blair... claimed that controlling speed was at the heart of our strategy ”



SPEED

Safer Vehicles?



The chapter that looks at car design "Safer Vehicles", follows uncritically the agenda of the motor manufacturers.

Technology

The emphasis remains one of "crashworthiness" and performance improvements. This is despite substantial and compelling evidence that this technology serves to insulate drivers from the road environment and encourages them to take less care.

Common sense

It is common sense, visible in data on everything from seat belts to anti-lock brakes and car size. It is admitted by official road safety establishment figures like Leonard Evans of General Motors, yet there is no mention of this effect of 'Volvo culture'.

We are also appalled at the prospect of pedestrian safety being thought of in terms of "pedestrian friendly" car fronts.

Real safety

There is no mention made about the fact that new cars are not designed to be driven comfortably at low speed, have inaccurate speedometers, can far

exceed maximum speed limits and many other factors which if tackled would radically improve real safety.

Black box

On-board black box technology to assist in post-collision investigation is available but unmentioned.

We have persistently argued with the DETR that, where possible, technology should be used to reduce the threat that motorists pose to others.

This could be achieved by the use of automatic on-board speed governors to reduce the ability of motorists to drive dangerously.

Evade justice

Alternatively, the use of black box recorder type devices will let drivers know that there will be no opportunity to evade justice after a crash for which they are responsible.

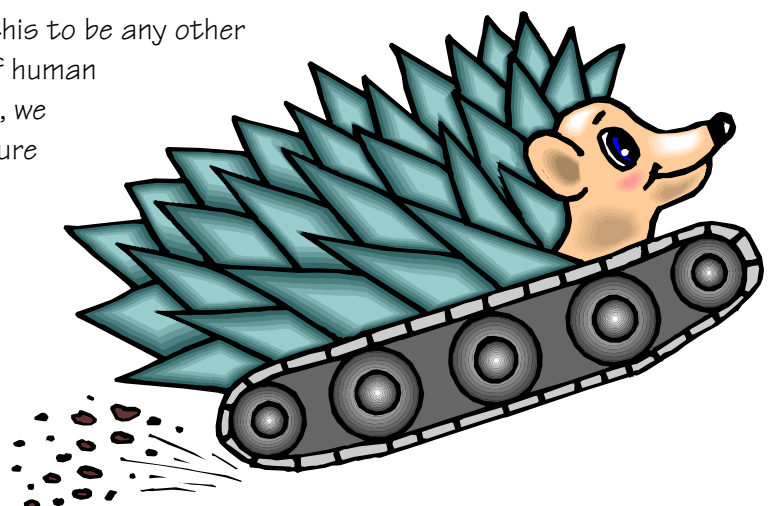
Fun

Were this to be any other area of human activity, we can be sure that car designers would have designed cars which could be

driven almost totally without human input - and it's resultant capacity for collision.

Those with a desire to play at driving for fun could be provided with sophisticated computer games at which they could indulge their fantasies without responsibility. But currently when it comes to cars, motorist power and privilege gets priority.

"Where possible technology should be used to reduce the threat that motorists pose to others"



Law enforcement and sentencing is a crucial area. The perception of realistic chances of being caught and banned for driving offences can be a potent measure for road safety.

Partial and minor

Campaigners have long pointed out the amorality of killer drivers getting away without even the prospect of custodial sentences. Yet the only definite measures proposed are partial and minor.

Scandal

Amending maximum fines for careless driving will not fundamentally reduce the scandal of drivers who are responsible for having killed or injured being allowed to continue driving.

The task is to confront the fact that because "normal" rule and law infringement is implicated in killing or hurting other road users, any civilised system must deal with this kind of behaviour as a problem to be dealt with, not as a 'tolerable crime' because it is so prevalent.

Strict liability

The question of making collisions where pedestrians or cyclists are hurt or killed defined as offences of strict liability, with the onus of proof on the motorised, should be raised.

Failing to stop

There are no attempts to measure levels of rule and law infraction and devote resources accordingly.

There are no attempts to address the problems of "failing to stop" incidents, and intelligent systems to approach it.

Green light

In that sense motorists are being given the green light to carry on maiming and killing, with the prospect of a penalty involving a custodial sentence still highly unlikely, even if the offender is caught and evidence correctly gathered.

In the majority of cases all that will happen is the possibility of a year long suspension, with what is now a typical fine of two or three hundred pounds.

Maximum

Doubling the maximum that could be paid is hardly likely to make any difference to driver behaviour or the feelings of the loved ones of those who have been killed or hurt by it.



"Motorists are being given the green light to carry on maiming and killing"

Pedestrians, Cyclists and, er, Horseriders?

We don't have anything against horse riders.

However, it says something about the DETR Road Safety Division's view of walkers and cyclists that they should share a chapter of the Road Safety Strategy with a transport mode which went out of fashion a hundred years ago.

Hopeful statements

As far as walking and cycling is concerned, there are some hopeful statements, compared with the truly awful draft strategy that was circulated a couple of years ago.

Training courses for cyclists and measures to "help drivers become more aware of their responsibilities towards all vulnerable road users through better training and testing" are to be welcomed.

Resources

It is hard, though, to see the resources becoming available for either in the short term. It is worth noting that the space devoted to cycle training is about the same as that given to the use of bells on bicycles.

Helmets

In contrast, encouragement of cycle helmet wearing is still seen as the main means of reducing cycling danger. Of the 9 paragraphs in the Cycling section, 5 are exclusively concerned with

helmets.

Yes, of course helmet wearing may reduce the consequences of an accident, but we should be promoting safety, not less serious accidents. Helmet promotion gives out the discouraging signal to non-cyclists that cycling is 'dangerous', and contradicts the otherwise positive message that 'making it easier for people to walk or cycle short journeys is a key part of integrated transport strategy and of wider Government objectives'.

Low key

The modal share of both walking and cycling continues to decline. The Strategy admits in a rather low key way that there is a need to get accurate exposure data and to look at casualty rates rather than raw numbers (which are bound to decline as usage falls).

This is to be welcomed, but hard-pressed local authorities will have to find more accurate and comprehensive ways to survey and record journeys by cyclists, walkers and, dare we say, horse riders.

There is, on the other hand, no hint that any other means of measuring danger are to be looked at.

Confusion

This chapter once again demonstrates the confusion in the Department about the connection between

increasing the levels of cycling and walking and reducing the danger faced by such modes. There is no recognition that heightening the sense of danger ("parents in particular should be aware of the heightened danger to children"), can undermine efforts at promotion, unless the context is very clearly established.

Philosophy

The underlying philosophy is revealed by the statement that "there is no question of increasing the amount of cycling without a decrease in accident rates". It would be interesting to see the same principle applied to driving.



Of all the chapters in the Road Safety Strategy, the section on road infrastructure is the weakest on detail. There is little here that is new and certainly no effort to reconsider the philosophy which has guided past practice.

Old Approach

While acknowledging that the old approach of treating accident hot spots is changing to a broader area or route approach, there is little attempt to consider more radical alternatives to existing models. In reference to local transport plans there is an injunction to local authorities to set local targets which both reflect national targets and relate to other parts of the plan such as encouraging walking and cycling. But what does this actually mean?

Better road safety

Achieving “better road safety” still seems to mean treating only those sites where significant rates of return are achievable, with no recognition that the level of road danger is a crucial deterrent to more sustainable modes.

Intimidated

How, therefore, can local authorities justify expenditure on routes where few casualties occur because

vulnerable road users are too intimidated to go there? How can they square their road safety investment with the need to encourage walking and cycling?

Car culture

There is a welcome emphasis on the role of road safety officers.

However, the implication of the strategy as a whole is that their activities will continue to focus on training vulnerable road users to cope with danger rather than confronting the car culture which creates this danger in the first place.

Relatively protected

Without a means to prioritise the safety of vulnerable road users over relatively protected car occupants and a refusal to consider casualty rates, all casualties are lumped together as an undifferentiated whole. It is hard to see how the “safer infrastructure” envisaged here can lead to a more sustainable transport mix. There is nothing here to help us move forward.



“ There is... no effort to reconsider the philosophy which has guided past practice ”

Conference - Destroying Traffic Myths

22nd May 2000, Central Hall,
Westminster, London

Since publishing its Integrated Transport Strategy, the government's resolve has crumbled in the face of sustained pressure from motoring interests. The government has retreated on fuel taxation, road building, tougher drink driving laws and speed policy in the face of the car culture.

The new RDRF conference examines the arguments which promote car culture. It's objective is to help professionals and campaigners combat the myths and misinformation which sustain the motoring lobby.

The keynote address by David Begg, Chair of the Integrated Transport Commission, will be followed by a debate on the role of the car in future transport policy.

Other speakers will examine the economic, technological and safety implications of transport policy, together with questions of road space allocation and speed control. Selling the message of sustainable transport will be a key feature of the conference.

Further information and an application form can be obtained from: Chris Hamer, Road Safety Officer, Harrogate Borough Council, Knapping Mount, West Grove Road, Harrogate HG1 2AE. Tel: (01423) 500600.

They expected so much more, a vision and commitment to really take road safety to the next level! Instead the Government has "wimped out"!

According to RDRF President Lord Berkeley, the Government must force those who create road danger to take responsibility. "This is a moral issue, not one about selective statistics. We need to get back to understanding who is killing whom and reduce danger at its source - the motorised road user."

Continued from front page

driving. Such an assertion is absent from the road safety strategy. There is no attempt to tackle the motoring lobby head on and place responsibility for reducing danger where it belongs, behind the driving wheel. Sadly this document represents yet more backtracking on sustainable transport policy by the Government.

Where the Government should be taking a lead it merely passes the buck to more politically sensitive Local Authorities. The strategy includes some fine advice on good practice, but the response of most forward thinking Authorities is that they are already doing this.

Briefing Documents

The following short summaries of the Road Danger Reduction Forum's views are still available:

1. Introduction to Road Danger Reduction
2. A Philosophy for Road Safety Plans
3. Enforcement
4. Road Safety Education
5. Dangerous Cyclists
6. Casualties and Road Danger Reduction
7. Car Culture

New Agenda will appear at least twice a year.

Contributions (max 1000 words) on innovative work to increase real road safety are welcomed.

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