

The Strategic Framework for Road Safety – PACTS’ Comments

Introduction

To begin at the beginning: “Road safety is a priority for the Government. Great Britain has one of the leading road safety records in the world and we want to maintain its record and build upon it”. Those are the first two sentences. The challenges are: does the framework live up to this ambition? How can the road safety community help to achieve it? How can it help Great Britain to contribute to the goals of the UN Decade of Action for Road Safety?

The role of central government and the current context

As is to be expected in such a strategy, much of the document focuses on what might be called higher level principles. Paragraph 3.28 sets out the role of central government in the new context:

- To provide leadership
- To set the regulatory framework
- To negotiate, agree and implement international (including European) standards
- To manage the strategic road network
- To set standards for safe and responsible driving
- To provide public information and educational materials and
- To undertake and share research, good practice and data.

All of these are laudable. What is perhaps missing are the need to help others to improve and to monitor innovation. If you want to encourage innovation, you have to know what is going on and how effective it is.

The reference to providing leadership is clearly welcome. The issue of leadership is important and needs to be supported by government action to deliver crash reductions. These are most likely to be achieved through a combination of educational, enforcement and engineering initiatives. The leadership offered by government must enable both the public and private sectors to contribute to the process of casualty reduction, encouraging the development of technical expertise and identifying and supporting best practice.

The current context is also problematic. The document acknowledges that road safety is an example of the Big Society in action (paragraph 1.10). However, the context in which this Big Society is operating is a complex one. There will be no imposition from above and greatly reduced funding. Local authorities will be allowed to determine their own solutions. There will be greater transparency and accountability to local communities. Power, tools and funding flexibility will be transferred to local people. The overarching priority must be “to restore the public finances”. In other words, road safety will have to fight its corner for resources in the current period of restraint.

Targets and outcomes

Given the general government reluctance to embrace targets, it is hardly surprising that the framework does not include targets for further casualty reduction. At the same time, section 6 entitled “Casualty Forecasts” looks at recent trends in casualty reduction and projects those forward. This leads to the conclusion that we could see reductions in deaths of between 37% and 46% by 2020 based on the 2005-09 average. “This is neither a target nor a definitive

forecast” (paragraph 6.11). However, it is a pair of projections against which progress can be measured and the government’s performance can be assessed.

The use of 2005-09 as the baseline years is consistent with previous practice in monitoring progress. However, it may easily be rendered meaningless by the recent sharp and sustained decrease in deaths. Assuming that the number of deaths in Great Britain in 2010 turn out to be between 1900 and 2000, Table 6.1 indicates further reductions of around 10-20% by 2020 rather than the 37-46% quoted and 12-30% by 2025 and 15-38% by 2030. Such a low level of ambition is disappointing and does not reflect the more successful approaches to casualty reduction set out in either Vision Zero or Sustainable Safety. British pragmatism seems to have become beset with inertia.

Annex B also sets out an outcomes framework against which progress can be monitored. This is a work in progress since a number of the outcomes have still to be developed. However, it does bring together a number of sources of previously disparate data from various government departments and includes an indicator relating to perceptions of road safety. This last is particularly important if people are to be encouraged to walk or cycle when fear of traffic may be a preventing factor. There is also an interesting indicator showing the proportion of drivers injured by age of vehicle – again this could help to demonstrate improvements in vehicle safety. PACTS welcomes this set of indicators but would wish to work with the Department to develop them further and to look at others that might also be included.

In particular, the following points need to be considered as part of the development of the outcomes framework. First, it will be difficult to interpret the numbers killed or KSI in collisions involving drivers under the age of 25 without the corresponding number of drivers under 25 who are licensed in the year concerned. Secondly, both the North Review and the Transport Select Committee report highlighted the need to monitor the number of killed or KSI in collisions involving drivers with a BAC below the current legal limit of 80mg. Given the growing use of roadside digital screening devices, it should now be easier for this data to be gathered and reported. Thirdly, there is a need to define “excessive speed” more clearly. Is this “excess” speed or a speed considerably above the posted speed limit for the road concerned? Fourthly, the indicators need to separate casualties by urban and rural roads and by severity.

The importance of information

There is a clear strand running through the document about the importance of information to help people make decisions. This operates both at the individual citizen level with the suggestion of a website to help citizens compare and contrast their own local authority with other comparable bodies – a road safety equivalent of the Home Office Crime Maps, perhaps – and at professional level with the emphasis on bringing together the portals of good practice and offering better and clearer information to the road safety profession. The second of these has been called for by professionals for some time with the need to co-ordinate the Road Safety Knowledge Centre, the CIHT portal, DfT’s own research programme and a number of other sources. This needs to be taken forward as quickly as possible.

What will also be vital will be for the DfT to be seen to champion the case for evidence-led or evidence gathering interventions. This approach may, on occasion, require the funding of proper evaluation plans for selected schemes so that good practice is identified and encouraged. Such a process could be enabled through a grant awarded to local authorities through a simple bidding arrangement.

Educational interventions

Early in the framework, there is a reference to a post-test vocational qualification in order to improve the skills of young drivers. At one point, this is described as “an effective successor to the Pass Plus Scheme” (page 9). Later additional information is given that this will have “appropriate accreditation and assessment to ensure market confidence in the new qualification (paragraph 4.8) and, in Annex A, that it will help to develop “driving skills after passing the driving test”. PACTS would suggest that the Department needs to provide a clearer definition of this qualification. Is it intended for all new drivers (as Pass Plus is) or is it intended as a genuine vocational qualification applicable to young employees who may find themselves driving in the course of work not long after qualifying with or without adequate preparation by their employers?

The second set of educational interventions is aimed at offenders and builds on driver improvement and speed awareness courses. Such courses are entirely laudable. However, a great deal of emphasis is placed upon them in the framework with only limited research evidence of their effectiveness. It will be vital to ensure that such courses are developed robustly and that their effectiveness (especially on reoffending rates) is monitored properly. The framework does not include any reference to evaluation. This is a surprising oversight, especially since some evaluation of such courses has been undertaken by Anders Wahlberg. His research concludes that specific interventions aimed at specific groups can have significant short-term effects. However, the extent to which these effects can be sustained over time is unclear. His work should not be overlooked.

In the context of developing a suitable model for evaluation, the methodology adopted for the evaluation of drink-drive rehabilitation courses, suitably amended for the new context, could also offer a model here.

Enforcement

The proposal to extend the use of fixed penalty notices to include careless driving was originally proposed in the consultation on Road Safety Compliance published in November 2008. In its response, PACTS commented that it would be important to give clear advice as to which behaviours were suited to a fixed penalty, that the use of driver improvement courses should not be overlooked and that FPNs for careless driving should not become viewed in the same light as those issued for speeding offences. Those comments seem to retain their validity. The argument for such an approach is that it will reduce police bureaucracy and increase the levels of enforcement. That may be a pious hope as police forces are reduced in numbers.

Furthermore, the emphasis on enforcement as a means of reducing lawlessness on the road and focusing on drivers causing harm to other road users is also likely to come under pressure given the overall reductions in police numbers. The proposed merger of the roads policing departments of Thames Valley and Hampshire Police is reported as leading to a reduction of 82 dedicated roads policing officers. While some efficiencies can be achieved through merger or sharing of services, the loss of highly trained and committed personnel will result in less roads policing activity.

The Framework also confirms the proposed approach to the North Review of drink and drug driving. The government is clearly firmly opposed to a lowering of the current drink-drive limit, preferring to focus on drivers well above the limit. Given the strength of the scientific

evidence underpinning the case for a lower limit, this decision is disappointing. At the same time, PACTS welcomes the commitment to taking forward many of the other less controversial measures contained in the North Review. In particular, given the emphasis on education as a means to achieve rehabilitation, it might well be appropriate to look at lowering the criteria for the High Risk Offender course to those twice over the current limit (i.e.160mg) rather than the current two and a half times.

Finally, there is a suggestion that fines should rise for speeding, mobile phone and pedestrian crossing offences and for failure to wear a seat-belt. It is certainly the case that fines for motoring offences are out of line with a number of other fines. It is entirely right to have a review of all fines to ensure consistency across the offence types.

Engineering measures

Given the proven cost-effectiveness of investments in road engineering, it is surprising to find few references to the importance of continuing investment in engineering, especially on rural roads where most car occupants are killed. This also fails to build on the reference to the safe systems approach that is made in the document. It would appear that the overall tone is heavy on education and enforcement but very light on engineering. Perhaps this reflects the expectation that this side of road safety will be continued by local authorities. At the same time, without the recognition of the importance of engineering interventions, local councils may think that this way of improving safety is to be accorded a low priority.

Funding

While PACTS appreciates that it is difficult to give detail about funding in the current climate, the framework is extraordinarily vague on identifying the plan for resourcing the next 10 years. Although there are references to both the Local Sustainable Transport Fund and the possible use of the public health grant, both of these will have wider and higher level government outcomes that will drive local funding allocations. It is difficult, therefore, to see how much of this money will become available for road safety.

Gaps

One striking omission is any indication of any external involvement in the implementation or achievement of the framework. To help implement “*Tomorrow’s Roads – safer for everyone*”, the government initially established a Ministerial Road Safety Panel. When advice needed to be augmented by a focus on implementation, it was complemented by a Delivery Board bringing together those organisations with direct responsibility for road safety. In the framework, there is no indication that either group will continue in order to channel advice and encouragement, maintain motivation or assess the capacity and capability of the profession. Whatever structure for overseeing the framework is put in place, it will need to incorporate representatives from both the delivery and research sectors.

The section on research, while welcome, could also be strengthened. GB should be more visibly involved in EU research projects, whether directly by DfT or by external groups acting on its behalf. In addition, the system of External Research Advisors seems to be in abeyance. This is an omission since the current DfT programme for research needs to be supported by external advice to help to identify topics for funding that offer good prospects of results with current relevance.

Conclusion

At present the UK is the safest country in the EU. With that status come clear responsibilities to take a leadership role in the EU. It should play a more proactive role in developing EU policy in the next decade and make its own strong contribution to the new 2020 Road Safety Targets to cut road deaths by 50% across the EU.

Early in the framework there are references to the systems and public health approaches to problem solving. In the coming years, road safety will need to adopt a more comprehensive methodology to reducing casualties and improving safety and these two approaches offer some insights for us. The long-term commitment within GB policy making to road safety allows us an opportunity to develop a moral and economic approach to road safety building on the best contained within the Swedish and Dutch models.

At the same time, there is also a tension in the framework between the aspirations of being the best in the world and adopting comprehensive approaches on the one hand and the agenda of localism on the other. What if local councils are not interested or do not have the money to help GB be the best in the world? How do we encourage the under-performing local authorities to improve their achievements without some kind of central support or monitoring of performance?

This would seem to be a key role for PACTS in the coming years. It should aim to focus on

- Assisting with the development and evaluation of the educational courses
- Helping the profession to develop structures for challenge and comparison of performance
- Continuing to ensure Parliamentary scrutiny of the framework and of progress towards further casualty reduction
- Encouraging government and professionals to learn from research and good practice by narrowing the gap between the two
- Helping the interested public to interpret information about the occurrence of collisions and the scope for safety measures at the local level
- Encouraging and participating in a World Bank capacity review of road safety in Great Britain
- Providing a link between policy and delivery
- Continuing to argue for the adoption of research-based solutions to transport safety problems
- Helping government to develop dynamic national road safety campaigns and linking them with local authorities and partnerships and
- Building on existing European and international contacts to contribute to and learn from progress during the UN Decade.