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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Opening remarks

Good morning everyone.

And thanks for that welcome.

I'm delighted to be here.

Today I want to talk about the changing nature of road safety.

And how we see policy evolving in the years ahead.

But as this is my first Pacts conference as Road Safety Minister, I'd like to start by thanking you for the vital job you do.

I've had the pleasure of meeting many of you over the past six months.

And I have to say I've been tremendously impressed by the professionalism and dedication of people across the road safety sector.

Safety divide

That's in stark contrast to many other countries.

In fact the most recent Global Status Report on road safety revealed that half of nations around the world are actually seeing road deaths rise.

While prosperous countries with resources to spend on infrastructure, policing, road safety advertising and training have road death rates as low as 3 per 100,000 population.....

The death rate in the developing world, where the infrastructure's crumbling, and car use is soaring, can be more than ten times higher.

When we see statistics like these, we can't help but feel fortunate to live in a country with such a good safety record.

The latest casualty figures for the UK show that fewer people are dying on our roads today than at any time since national records began in 1926.

And while that's a real achievement.....

I don't believe it's any reason to celebrate.

Because no matter how many surveys we read telling us that we're a safety leader, the fact remains that 1,730 people died on our roads between June 2012 and 2013.

That's still a devastating toll.

The problem is that it's difficult to say exactly why the statistics are falling.

As a result, we can't predict with any certainty how they'll look in the future.

That's why we always say that there's no room for complacency.

I believe every death on the road is one too many.

And one thing we do know is that we will only meet our objectives by consistently pushing the boundaries, and by raising safety standards right across the sector.

Enforcement

And with your help, that's precisely what we've been doing.

Together, we've delivered most of the objectives we set ourselves in the 2011 strategic framework for road safety.

We've toughened up enforcement to tackle the most dangerous drivers who consistently flout the laws of the road.

Police now have the necessary powers to issue fixed penalty notices, which in most cases have increased to £100 although educational training is sometimes be offered as an alternative.

It's important that we focus the toughest sanctions on the worst offenders.

I'd be interested in your views about how we can continue to do so effectively.

We are also working to get type approval for new mobile breath-testing equipment, which will allow officers to take evidential samples at the roadside.....

In parallel, we are getting rid of the statutory option, which allows drivers to play for time by asking for a doctor's sample.

Of course, police have been working with breathalysers, backed by a legal drink-drive limit, since 1967.

By comparison, the fight against drug-driving is only just beginning.

What's needed is effective technology to screen suspected drug drivers, and effective legislation to convict them.

That's why we introduced a new offence of driving over a particular limit for specified controlled drugs.

This brings the law into line with drink driving – and we expect to bring it into force this year.

In parallel we're funding some trial cannabis screening devices at selected police stations.

And we expect new roadside drug screeners to be available for police by next year.

I was at the Home Office's Centre for Applied Science and Technology earlier this week.

I saw for myself the rigorous approval process these screening devices are being put through.

It a process that even the most ambitious loophole lawyer would struggle to thwart.

But I want to warn people who do drive under the influence of drugs that this is just the start.

We'll be refining the technology and the enforcement strategy over time.

Vulnerable groups

But it's not just about drivers. In London, 80% of KSI casualties are vulnerable road users.

Car drivers and passengers are better protected than ever before, with sophisticated safety features now standard, even on entry-level models.

But as more people choose to walk, or travel by bike or motorcycle, the trend in London could spread throughout the country.

In 2012, pedestrians accounted for 24% of all fatalities in road accidents.

So we're making it easier for local authorities to introduce 20mph limits.

I also welcome the design improvements that vehicle manufacturers are making to reduce pedestrian injuries after a collision.

Cycling has been growing in popularity – particularly since the heroics of our cyclists at the 2012 Olympics.

But it isn't just the people who look good in lycra who need to feel safe cycling.

In some respects, that's the easiest bit.

I want the kind of person who has a basket on their handlebars to feel safe enough to pop to the shops on their bike.

So we have made £35 million available across England for schemes to improve the layout of roads and junctions to make them more cycle friendly.

And the Highways Agency is spending £20 million to improve existing infrastructure for cyclists on the strategic road network.

Direct government spending on cycling has grown significantly under this government to £278m – the biggest ever cycling investment programme this country has ever seen.

Motorcyclists now account for 19% of all road deaths, despite making up only 1% of traffic.

So we've commissioned research to look at Compulsory Basic Training to make sure that we're embedding safe riding from the start.

All these measures to protect more vulnerable road users are supported by our THINK! road safety campaigns.

These go well beyond simple advertising.

For example, we've launched a new THINK! resource centre to help teachers educate children and teens about road safety.

And we're also working in partnership with the RAC Foundation and Aardman on a new road safety competition for 4-16 year olds.

Rural roads

So we've made excellent progress since 2011's strategic framework.

But what about the future?

There are many different ways of thinking about how to make the roads safer. I hope this conference. Will start to identify some of the best ones.

We've already thought a little bit about that.

For example, we know that we need to cut fatal accidents on rural roads.

The statistics show that a shocking 61% of fatalities currently occur on rural roads.

So as part of the THINK! campaign strategy for 2014/15 we're developing a campaign to alert drivers to the dangers of rural roads.

Technology

Alternatively, we could think about new technologies which might improve road safety.

Car safety systems, like air bags, have already helped save many lives.

I know that there are also new technologies which could save even more lives, for example autonomous emergency braking, which could make sure cars braked for pedestrians and cyclists.

We're also starting to think about how driverless cars could work on our roads.

Driverless cars could be a real opportunity to eliminate human error in driving, but we need to make sure that new systems are safe.

I also hope that the use of "black box" technology will become much more widespread over the next few years.

Telematics are already revolutionising the insurance industry.

Increasingly, we'll see insurers reward safer drivers, and penalise unsafe drivers.

There are almost 300,000 telematics policies on the road already.

As the boxes become more widespread – or indeed the technology is refined into a smart phone app - they will act as a powerful incentive for people to adhere to the laws of the road.

They're also being used increasingly by fleet managers – not just to encourage safer driving by employees, but also to reduce fuel consumption across the company fleet.

But as technology develops, there's a risk some of it hinders all of our efforts to make our road safer.

We know that mobile communications are getting more sophisticated. We will need to make sure that drivers use them wisely while they drive

Other ideas

There are so many other ways of thinking about road safety policy.

Which groups have the most accidents?

Who is most at risk?

How will changes in population affect road safety? For example, we're used to thinking about the problems posed by young drivers. But as our populations age what are the different challenges that come with increasing numbers of older people reliant on their cars on the roads?

I'm sure you will have many more ideas and I look forward to hearing about them.

Conclusion

The long-term future's difficult to predict.

What we can be certain of are changes.

Changes in technology... changes in society... changes in lifestyles

How well we progress will depend on how we develop and adapt to all of this.

I'm confident, but not complacent.

We've made big strides over recent years.

And we will continue to do so, together.

Thank you.

