

Stephen Hammond. Road Safety Minister.
Speech to PACTS conference.

1820 words.

Opening remarks

Thank you for that introduction.

It's a pleasure to join you today.

With so many experts and delegates here from a variety of professional backgrounds, I'm sure it's going to be a fascinating day....

And one that will make an important contribution to the road safety debate.

So I'm very grateful to PACTS for inviting me along - to talk about the vital importance of understanding casualty trends.

Road safety over the decades

For the past decade, Britain's road safety record has been among the best in the world.

And I am pleased to note that Tuesday's provisional 2012 European fatality figures show that the UK is still among the safest countries.

Thanks to the efforts, contribution and dedication of many people.....

From charities to police forces.....

From car designers to highway engineers.....

And from central government to local councils.....

Our road safety industry has a well-earned reputation for professionalism and innovation.

But it wasn't always so.

For much of the 20th century, we had a poor safety record.

In the mid 1920s, for example, when Henry Ford was revolutionising motoring, the number of fatal road accidents in this country soared.

In 1941 – the year when German bombing of British cities reached a peak- nearly 10,000 people died on our roads.

And as recently as 1966, there were nearly 8,000 road deaths in Britain...

Still the largest toll in our peacetime history.....

And a staggering four times higher than today.....

With less than half the number of vehicles on the roads.

Role of statistics

We know all this because of official industry statistics....

Published every year in Britain for the best part of 90 years.

As the data has improved, so has our understanding of why accidents happen.

That - in turn - has helped us develop safer vehicle technologies, more effective policing, new approaches to driver training, and better road design; and to influence behaviour and attitudes.

It has also helped us focus efforts on protecting the most vulnerable groups of road users like cyclists and motorcyclists.

And it will continue to help us raise our performance in the future.

That future will be more about enhancing an already-effective road safety strategy - rather than re-inventing it.

As our roads get safer, we will have to work harder to keep the number of road deaths falling....

We need steady, incremental improvements to everything we do.

With road conditions in a constant state of flux, it's never been more crucial that we understand and respond to changing trends.

Sophisticated data will help us do that.

So we can continue to lead the world in road safety.

How we measure safety

But what about today?

How effective is our current system of data collection?

The DfT figures mostly come from STATS19, a very well used resource which comes from police reports of road traffic accidents.

We believe it's the best and most accurate way of understanding what's happening on our roads.

It takes account of all accidents involving human death or personal injury which are notified to the police within 30 days, and in which one or more vehicles are involved.

But road safety practitioners don't just rely on police-reported statistics.

Other sources of data include hospital records, insurance records, and detailed assessment of vehicles and accident sites.

Of course this system is not perfect all the time.

Many personal injury accidents are not reported to the police.

And police are not required to attend every incident.

So we don't record every slight injury.

And 'damage only' accidents are not included in the statistics.

Data collection has to be balanced against police time and resources – so we focus on the most important elements of each incident to give us the best and most accurate overview.

But the main point is that very few – if any – fatal accidents go unreported.

Nearly fifty pieces of information are collected about each accident, vehicle and casualty involved in each personal-injury accident.

So the quality of information is very good.

The system follows internationally-agreed definitions.

In fact most other European countries also base their data on police-recorded accidents.

And the UK actively participates in international groups on road safety data.

It is this richness of information that makes STATS19 data such a useful tool for understanding trends.

And for helping us identify what actions we should take to save even more lives in the future.

But we are always open to new ideas that might improve the quality of our data.....

Help us gather information more effectively....

Or help us learn lessons from trends in the data.

Trends

For example, the statistics showed that there was a blip in 2011, following an excellent year in 2010.

The statistics show that – even among the best-performing nations – there is always the potential for small yearly exceptions to the overall downward trend.

And that's because road safety is not an exact science.

In the provisional report for the year to the end of September 2012, we can also detect other patterns.

There's an upturn in casualties among cyclists, motor cyclists and pedestrians, for example.

But there's also a 7% drop in overall fatalities.

Detailed information like this helps us in many ways.

It means we can target our THINK! advertising campaigns to protect vulnerable groups.

It means we can work with councils to ensure that funding is targeted to improve road safety at local levels.

And it helps vehicle manufacturers design cars and trucks with safety features that protect not just the vehicle occupants, but other road users too.

This is something I saw first hand during my visit to TRL last Thursday.

But there are a number of speakers today who will explore and seek to explain changing safety statistics.

For example, I think Louise Lloyd from TRL is talking about an interesting report commissioned by Surrey County Council on the causes of falling road deaths since 2007 in their county.

I certainly welcome any research that makes a valuable contribution to the debate.

After all, we all share the same goal: safer roads.

And the better the research, the more chance we have of saving lives.

Websites

As Road Safety Minister, I want to foster an ethos of continuous improvement.....

Raising the bar every year.

It's the only way to guard against complacency and keep on driving those statistics down.

That's why today I am announcing two new websites.....

Which I believe will make a significant contribution to the provision and understanding of road safety statistics in the future.

First, the Road Safety Comparison Site.

This sets out collision and casualty figures against population, traffic levels, road length and authority spending, to show how local authorities have performed over the last seven years.

As well as putting casualty figures into context, the site provides a mapping facility so people can see how many cyclists or children have been involved in collisions on a particular road.

This is part of wider government effort to improve transparency and accountability by providing accessible information on public services.

The new website will give local residents a more accurate picture of how their council is performing in reducing road casualties.

It will also help local authorities assess their own progress.

If a council is performing particularly well, then I want to see them share best practice so that other regions across the country can benefit.

Even the best performing authorities may find that particular types of driver or vehicle are over-represented in their statistics.

This will help them focus attention on the right areas to gain the maximum benefit and provide greater transparency for interested parties.

The second website we are launching is the Road Safety Observatory - a new research portal - giving road safety professionals access to research on a variety of relevant topics.

The Observatory provides access to empirical road safety research by summarising it in plain English.

This site has been part funded by the Department and a board drawn from various road safety bodies, including PACTS and RoSPA.

The Observatory will be a live site that will be updated as and when new research is produced.

Wider strategy

I believe these websites will make a very significant contribution to our road safety strategy by improving the accuracy, detail and the accessibility of statistics.

They were part of the commitment we made in the Strategic Framework for Road Safety announced in May 2011.

This set our vision for empowering local decision makers, improving driver training, and targeting enforcement more effectively.

And we are making real progress in many areas of that strategy.

- We're tackling the high cost of insurance.
- We're increasing penalties for careless driving.
- We're closing down the legal loopholes that allow some drivers to replace breath tests with blood or urine samples.
- We've made it simpler for councils to put in pace 20mph zones.

- We are giving more than £1 billion to local councils enabling them to improve the transport infrastructure – including the design of better and safer roads.
- We're introducing a new drug driving offence.
- We've made practical changes to the driving test so people actually learn how to drive safely on their own, and so real road conditions are reflected during the test.
- We've recently made available £30m to improve dangerous junctions for cyclists.
- And I'm keen to explore ways to reduce the toll of young people who are being killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions.

Conclusion

Right across the spectrum of road safety policy, we are upping our game.

We will never be complacent while people are still losing their lives in road accidents, because I know that behind every statistic is a father or mother, a son or daughter, a brother or sister.

We are committed to consistent improvement in all areas of our strategy....

Including the gathering and sharing of statistics....

And learning lessons from them.

In tough times, we all have less money to spend.

So focusing investment on measures that provide the best value and the best results is vital.

And we know that our road safety data is not 100% precise.

We believe our current system is the best possible, given the practicalities of data collection.

Of course we are always ready to learn more.

And we welcome new research or suggestions that might help in the future to inform our policies.

That's what continuous improvement is all about.

And that's why I look forward to working with you in the months and years ahead - with a shared determination to make our roads the very safest they can possibly be.

Thank you.