

MONDAY 27 OCTOBER 2008

Present

Bradshaw, L (Chairman)
Dykes, L
James of Blackheath, L
Paul, L
Rowe-Beddoe, L
Walpole, L
Whitty, L

Witnesses: **Mr Rod Paterson**, Head of Europe Branch, Department for Transport, **Mr Gabriel Hammond**, Rail Standards and Safety Policy and Technical Adviser, Department for Transport, **Ms Susie Northfield**, Head of Rail Freight Branch, Department for Transport, **Mr Martin Jones**, Head of Road Strategy Division, Department for Transport, **Mr Nick Barter**, Head of Branch in Integrated Transport Economics and Appraisal, Department for Transport, **Mr Andrew Colski**, Vulnerable Road Users Team Leader, Department for Transport and **Mr Graham Hanson**, Head of Traffic Signs branch, Department for Transport, examined.

Q1 Chairman: Do you wish to say anything, or do you want us to start?

Mr Paterson: No, please start.

Q2 Chairman: I will start with the issue of rail noise abatement. I had the opportunity of standing beside the M40 at High Wycombe on Thursday evening and the noise was phenomenal from road transport. Is any comparison being done between the intermittent noise from railway noise and the continuous roar you get from a motorway?

Mr Hammond: Well, essentially, noise mapping in the UK is an activity that is being carried out as part of the European Noise Directive. It is actually for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to lead on that, so if you want an explicit statement on

it, I am afraid we will probably have to write, but what we do know is when it comes to transport noise in the round, that railways are not a large contributory factor, and when it comes to rail freight, rail freight is not a large contributory factor to rail noise.

Q3 Chairman: Why is the European Community threatening to take action against rail freight? Who are the driving forces?

Mr Hammond: I think essentially this is an issue that has been raised within Europe, on the Continent, because of noise issues in the Rhine Valley and possibly in the Netherlands as well. In Europe, the noise that is generated from cast-iron brake blocks is potentially quite upsetting, I think it affects something like 15 or 16 million Europeans to the point where they get upset enough to complain, and I believe that the initiative is driven by people in that area.

Q4 Chairman: I certainly would not want measures to be taken here which were caused by problems in one little place, and 15 to 16 million in the European Community does not strike me as being a very large number. I also want to know, please, there are methods - the noise mitigation equipment which can be fitted to freight trains, the fitting of composite brakes - which substantially reduce the noise. As far as I understand, there are two types of composite brakes, one which is very expensive, and one which is relatively cheap. Of course, if countries are allowed to have state aid, they will obviously go for the more expensive, but do you have any views on how sufficient is the noise abatement to be got from the cheaper alternatives that you might use here?

Mr Hammond: Well essentially, in the United Kingdom, the rolling stock, the freight wagon fleet, is already 80 per cent braked with composite brake blocks or with disc wheel brakes, and so therefore, any measure coming out of Europe which impacts on retrofitting of wagons in the UK is going to have a very limited effect. Of the other 20 per cent, we know that 9 per cent, so 9 per cent of the full 100 per cent, are cast-iron in the UK, and we do not know about

the other 11 per cent. So the impact is likely to be relatively limited in the UK. Sorry, what was the other part of your question?

Q5 Chairman: Well, it is a question of state aid, because if state aid is going to be allowed, first of all, I think it is doubtful that it is in the interests of this country, bearing in mind we have fitted nearly all our vehicles, and I certainly would not want this country to be involved in paying for somebody else's vehicles to be upgraded to a higher standard.

Mr Hammond: Well, we are not really in a position to debate what happens with state aid, but one thing that I can say is that if there are technical proposals that are created which generate the need to relax the rules on state aid in the European Union, then we would be pressing to make sure that those processes are completely transparent, so that UK manufacturers and operators maintain a level playing field so far as possible in the European Union.

Q6 Chairman: Lastly, can you tell me, you mentioned only 9 per cent of our fleet has cast-iron brake blocks; is there a prospect that will be reduced anyway?

Mr Hammond: It is possible. I do not have precise figures on the ones that are currently cast-iron. I know that there are 11 per cent that are cast-iron in the UK at the moment, but they are likely to be older wagons. But even then, I cannot say at this point, but I am prepared to investigate it further and write to the Committee if you want.

Q7 Chairman: The last point is: are you aware of any places in the UK where there is actually concern about rail freight noise?

Mr Hammond: Not that I am aware of, but I think that is part of the activity in the Noise Mapping as part of the European Noise Directive.

Q8 Lord Dykes: Further to that, presumably that is also because the rail freight proportion in Britain is somewhat lower than maybe a country like Germany where they do have a higher incidence of rail freight, I believe, in comparison with road transport. I think that is so, is it not?

Mr Hammond: Apart from anything else, it is not just about composite brake blocks, a lot of our fleet that are bogied now have track friendly bogies which also reduce noise, so virtually any new wagon that has four axles has the potential to have suspension arrangements which reduce noise even further.

Q9 Lord Dykes: Is there also a noise nuisance factor coming from the fact that say in the Rhineland area, there would be more early hours freight trains going through after midnight until 7.00 am than in Britain?

Mr Hammond: It is possible; I am not an expert in German freight flows, but again I can ask European colleagues about that and write to you if necessary.

Q10 Lord Dykes: My Lord Chairman, coming back to my first point, it is generally accepted, I think, that the rail freight percentage is somewhat higher in Germany and France, I believe, maybe Italy as well, than in Britain, that we have more on road transport, in net terms, excluding the percentages that come from any exchanges between the two modes. Do you accept that?

Ms Northfield: Yes, that is true.

Q11 Lord Dykes: So allowing for that, it would be somewhat paradoxical if, as Lord Bradshaw is suggesting, the extra burden might be distributed around the Member States of rectifying the noise nuisances that emanate particularly from those narrowly focused Continental zones like in the Rhine area, as one example, which would have the unintended

effect of actually making road transport even more attractive vis-a-vis rail, while there is a substantial movement in this country trying to get more freight back on to the rail. Do you agree this would be an unfortunate consequence?

Ms Northfield: Clearly this is not a legislative proposal at the moment, but if a legislative proposal is brought forward in the future, we would need to carry out an impact assessment, and that would look at issues like that, if that was to be a risk, but it really depends on the form of any final proposals taken.

Q12 Lord Dykes: Incidentally, can I just conclude, My Lord Chairman, with one other attachment to that: do you expect this communication document just to remain within that field for a long, long time, or are you definitely assured that there is going to be legislation flowing from it?

Mr Paterson: I think we expected that there was going to be a legislative proposal on this by the end of the year. I think we have heard suggestions that it might be delayed beyond the end of the year, but I think we are expecting it in the future.

Q13 Lord Walpole: You mean during the French Presidency?

Mr Paterson: I do not think it will be necessarily during the French Presidency. I would have expected it to have appeared by now, I think, if it was going to be --

Q14 Lord Dykes: But you are expecting it in the reasonably near future?

Mr Paterson: The Commission have not intimated that they are dropping the intention to have a legislative proposal, but certainly there has been a lot of suggestion that they will not bring it forward quite as rapidly as they were planning to.

Chairman: And there will be proper consultation in this country before any legislative proposal goes forward. Lord Whitty will now take up the issue of the Eurovignette.

Q15 Lord Whitty: I am going to ask a question about the Eurovignette, and it is some years since I dealt with it, but about eight or nine years ago, we were about to impose a Eurovignette and it was never actually materialised. It was in any case put at a fairly pathetically low level. Since then we have had various developments and backed off that. The proposal now does allow us to charge for heavy goods vehicles for the use of, as I understand it, certain designated infrastructure. What plans are there now to introduce such charges for overseas freight, and what roads would they apply to?

Mr Jones: In the UK, there are currently no plans to introduce either a distance-based charge, as they have in Germany, or a time-based user charge of the type you mentioned that we had considered seven or eight years ago.

Q16 Lord Whitty: There are no plans. Could I ask why there are no plans when the burden of, if you like, Government taxation is actually to get, through the VED and so on, a proportion of the social costs including the infrastructure costs back from motorists and road users, but of course foreign registered vehicles do not pay that.

Mr Jones: If I may, My Lord Chairman, I will separate time-based user charges from distance-based charges. The Department looked at the possibility of introducing a time-based user charge at the back end of last year and early this year, although the motivation was less to do with requiring foreign operators to pay a share of the costs they impose, and it was more to do with trying to tackle unfair competition in the form of flouting safety rules, drivers' hours rules, overloading and the like. The way we enforce in this country is by identifying operators with a poor record of safety, and it is possible for the enforcement agencies, notably VOSA, to pick up the registration number at the side of the road, work out if that is a lorry operated by an at-risk operator, and target them. We were quite keen to do the same with foreign operators, where obviously we do not have the database that links the lorry to the operator, and we thought it would be helpful possibly to have a registration scheme whereby

any foreign lorry entering the country would make that registration, and in the process would pay a vignette which would help us with the running costs of the scheme. Quite a lot of work was undertaken on that, it was not me personally that was leading on that work, but I understand that the Minister, Jim Fitzpatrick, notified Parliament that we would not be proceeding further with that scheme, and the reasons were announced to Parliament that the benefits did not stack up at that time. As for time-based user charges, again, this one goes back a bit further, you will recall there was quite a lot of work done on the lorry road-user charge, that was a scheme which was not actually led by the Department for Transport, it was led by what was then Her Majesty's Customs and Excise, and again, Ministers announced to Parliament in 2005 why the procurement exercise that had been started was being discontinued. I am a little bit nervous of going further on that, because it was not the Department leading on that particular scheme, I was not fully au fait with the details at the time. There are certainly at the moment currently no plans to introduce any such scheme.

Q17 Lord Whitty: But the issue of unfair competition and the issue of contribution towards infrastructure costs is still there. I think on at least one of those two occasions, the main argument against was that the administrative costs outweighed the likely revenue, which is a fair enough argument, but on the other hand, the principle still remains. I have recently been on an inquiry into the A12 with your former Permanent Secretary chairing, where foreign lorries were clearly a substantial contribution to both the accident record and the congestion on the road, and it did seem odd that they were not contributing to this whereas all the British-owned hauliers would be. Is there any possibility of coming back to this one, would you say, or do you think the same arguments will be wheeled out against again?

Mr Jones: The fact that our Minister signed off an explanatory memorandum which said there were currently no plans I think can be taken as implying that we are not closed on this one, but these things are costly and difficult to set up. I know that the German scheme ran

into some quite considerable difficulties before they finally managed to get it into place, and they have been quite coy about costs and revenues from that, but the cost/revenue calculation for a major transit country like Germany is going to be different from the sort of cost/revenue calculation for a country like ours, where although we do have substantial volumes of foreign traffic on roads like the A12 or the M20, as a proportion of overall lorry traffic, by comparison with countries like Germany and France, the proportion is rather lower.

Q18 Lord Whitty: I think one other piece of information we need to know is clearly if the administrative costs outweigh the income, that rather depends on at what level you pitch the vignette, and quite what constraints you have on that in terms of European law would be useful to spell out.

Mr Jones: The answer to that is that the ceiling on the vignette is set in the directive which is currently up for adjustment, the Commission has not proposed touching the ceilings on the vignette, not to a significant degree anyway. Let us start with the daily rate: you are entitled to buy a daily ticket, it makes sense for countries with a land border, it makes less sense for countries like ours where people are coming over on the ferries, because you generally stay for more than a day, but the limit is €1 a day. If you compare that with, let us say, the German charging scheme, where they are charging, I think, something like about 15 euro-cents per kilometre for some of the larger vehicles, a typical vehicle running up 400 kilometres in a day could therefore run up a bill of €60 or €70, which is clearly a lot more than €1 a day. So the caps are actually quite constraining in the directive. In 1998, Lord Whitty, you might remember, when we were negotiating this under the UK Presidency, it was quite a thorny issue for the Germans, and they were pressing for a substantial increase in the vignette ceiling, and there was a lot of reluctance among Member States to give them a substantial increase. They eventually got a small increase in the ceiling. Since then obviously Germany has moved over to a distance-based charge, so they are not terribly

interested any more. It would be difficult to persuade a majority of Member States and indeed the Commission to foresee a significant rise in the vignette ceilings. I think the Commission would prefer to push everybody in the direction of distance-based charging.

Chairman: Might we ask for a considered written reply on this, please? All right, you may say the Government still has no intention of doing anything, but that will not please very many people, either in the road haulage industry or outside it. We move on, if we may, to the third area, which is the internalisation of external costs, and Lord Paul will take up the questioning.

Q19 Lord Paul: What is the confidence level that these proposals are adequately integrated with other EU policies such as biofuels, energy taxation and emission trading?

Mr Barter: There currently does not appear to be a conflict between the proposals and EU policies. But we will obviously look at any new proposals if they arise. It is probably worth pointing out, the Commission are aware of the different tools available for tackling externalities such as congestion, CO₂ and so on, and their strategy for internalisation has a section on choosing the right tool for each external cost, such as the ones I have listed, and these include taxes and emissions trading, and their approach seems sensible. It is also worth saying that the most appropriate instrument needs to be selected according to both the externality being targeted and the mode of transport, be it road, rail, air or water-borne, and that is set out quite clearly in the strategy.

Q20 Lord Paul: One keeps hearing from the trade that there are some quite big differences, but in your view, that is not true, in the costs and facilities?

Mr Barter: That is not my view, no.

Q21 Lord Whitty: Is it not more the implied cost of carbon for these different interventions is very different?

Mr Barter: It differs between us, for example, the Stern values are different to some of the values in the handbook, but they are not massively different. Also, just jumping ahead a little bit, the directive has a kind of two-pronged approach which allows Member States either to use their own methodology, which is based on a formula utilising their own data, or using Commission values, so there is a bit of freedom there.

Q22 Lord Paul: What methods will be used to decide on the level of external cost attributed to particular modes of transport?

Mr Barter: Firstly, it is worth noting that the Commission strategy only regulates for what Member States can do for lorries. We currently have freedom for other vehicles. Secondly, the Member States currently do not have much flexibility with what they can do for lorries, but the amending proposal does allow a lot more freedom, so as for the methodology itself, the internalisation annex to the proposed amending directive sets out how Member States can do it. As I mentioned before, this allows this two-pronged approach, where you can either adopt the values they have, which are set out in tables, and based on their handbook, or use their formula, and utilising our own data to come up with our own values, subject to a cap.

Q23 Lord Rowe-Beattie: Whilst I can appreciate the philosophy behind the internalisation of external costs, how do you see this affecting the consumer?

Mr Barter: Well, the proposals by themselves will not necessarily have an impact on consumers, because it is down to Member States if they want to adopt some kind of lorry road-user charge in the scheme, but if they were to adopt one, there could be some impacts on consumers. So firstly, given that the directive sets caps on the charges permissible, and that these costs are likely to represent only a fraction of both the total haulage costs and of the

value of the goods being hauled, then any impact on prices is going to be limited, and prices of goods in the shops should not rise by much at all. It is also worth pointing out that the fact that there are externalities that are not internalised suggests that society as a whole could benefit if they were internalised. So if you take a consumer living in a congested, noisy, polluted area, clearly they are going to benefit if those externalities are cut.

Q24 Lord Rowe-Beattie: Yes, I suppose so, but then, in the paper that we have been looking at, it does not actually say at this stage what governments may do with this revenue; obviously taxation is clearly paramount in probably most governments' mind at this time, which would not necessarily benefit the example you just gave about the intensely populated area of noise, people living in a lot of noise, et cetera. So how does one see that the revenues that could be raised in this fashion would actually benefit, at the end of the day?

Mr Barter: I do not know if my colleagues want to say something on the revenues, but the point I was making on the externalities would be that if it was quieter, so for a residential area that is now quieter and less polluted, then there would be benefits there, irrespective of what happens to the revenues, just because the externalities were lower.

Mr Paterson: That is how the Commission's impact assessment pitches it, that by getting the price signals right, the benefit would be to people making informed choices about which transport they use. Therefore, as Nick is saying, the congestion would go down; this would particularly benefit lower income families who tend to live in congested areas, but I emphasise that is in the Commission's impact assessment.

Q25 Lord Rowe-Beattie: They would benefit from quality of life, not necessarily financially?

Mr Paterson: Absolutely.

Q26 Lord Rowe-Beattie: The question is what the cost impact is on the goods, because I do not think I have ever been associated with a business that does not seek to pass on its costs immediately to the end user.

Mr Jones: There are two ways of answering this question. The first is in the context of freight, where there is a proposal to allow this to happen; the second is more generally where I think we are talking rather further into the future when this might happen. But let us suppose that a few European Member States add on an external cost element to their existing road user charge. Germany might do it, although it is worth saying, in the context of Germany, that they have struggled politically to achieve an increase within the existing rules, let alone adding on an extra bit for external costs, so it is by no means certain they will do this; the French are thinking about doing a distance-based charge. Let us suppose two or three countries in the centre of Europe did do this: if there were no change to operating practices, then yes, the cost of transporting goods to market would go up. What we do not know is how the hauliers might respond to that. In the past, the haulage industry, for all the accusations of failings that people might throw at it, has been pretty good at managing to develop efficiencies in the light of increasing costs. If you look at the pallet distribution networks that have revolutionised road haulage in this country over the last 10 years or so, I do not think anybody could have foreseen that the haulage industry was going to respond in that way and manage to drive out efficiencies. I think the desire would be that they would respond to the price signal, that there would be fewer journeys, but that the same effect would be delivered. It is a matter of speculation, it is very difficult to guess what might happen, but I do not think it necessarily means the consumer would pay more; we might get the benefits we want by new ways of doing things.

Q27 Chairman: Could I ask you a hypothetical question now? You have mentioned Germany several times, and I have heard several presentations about it. Whilst they admit

there were some initial difficulties in making the system work because people were, as it were, dodging off the roads which were tolled, many of those have been closed down, so that people are now paying. The charge reflects the amount of pollution, the amount of road damage of vehicles, so that the charge is strictly limited to the quality of the vehicle. Now you mention that Government is opposed to distance-based charge; is that because they are opposed to monies being hypothecated, and they would feel that money which was paid by hauliers through a system of distance-based charging should somehow be treated differently?

Mr Jones: I do not think the Government is necessarily opposed in principle to doing a distance-based charge. On the question of hypothecation, the current legislation on road charging, the Transport Act 2000, requires that any revenues, either from a scheme on one of the Secretary of State's roads or in the local area, it requires that that revenue is spent on transport. So the Government appears to accept the principle of hypothecation of revenues at least within domestic road charging schemes. Now having an EU directive telling you what to do is a different thing, but what the Government and Parliament might choose to do domestically has been shown in the Transport Act 2000. Sorry, does that answer all of your question? I think there might have been a bit more that I missed.

Q28 Chairman: Germany has decided to do it themselves, so therefore presumably it is not as a result of the EU directive; secondly, do you have reasonably up-to-date evidence that the German scheme is not working?

Mr Jones: The private contractors that operate the German scheme are fairly cagey with their figures. I saw a report produced by the European Parliament which showed some quite interesting maps indicating levels of diversion which tended to suggest it was a fairly localised problem. The other interesting figure that we have been trying to get hold of is levels of non-compliance and leakage of revenue. I have this third-hand via somebody from another Member State; they claim the figure is 5 per cent, but the person who was telling me

said he thought the figure could be significantly higher than that, because of the basic flaw in the calculation methods. The answer is we do not have any authoritative data ourselves on the German scheme, there is quite a lot of speculation about it.

Q29 Chairman: I should be interested if you could get some up-to-date information about how the scheme is working, what problems they have had, and how it has been adjusted, but as I gather, the scheme does not need lots of cameras or things that drivers drive under; once they come into Germany, and when they go out, they pay, and that is it.

Mr Jones: Yes, it is a satellite based system, there is a fairly expensive box you need to have fitted in the cab, and if you choose to have it fitted, it means having your lorry off the road for five or six hours. The alternative if you are an occasional user is that you log on to the website and you say, "I will be going on these roads on these days", and if you are caught driving off those roads on those days, then potentially you will get fined. But how intensive an enforcement effort they have backing this up is one of the questions we are not sure about.

Chairman: I would be very interested if you could let us have an up-to-date summary of what is going on there. Now we intend to pass away from internalisation to road safety, and Lord James will take over the questioning.

Q30 Lord James of Blackheath: Can I ask you: how far do you see scope for the harmonisation of driving regulations throughout Europe having any significant impact on the target to reduce road deaths by 50 per cent by 2010?

Mr Colski: I am not aware of any such proposals, so unlikely for anything to happen by 2010.

Q31 Lord James of Blackheath: Let me try you with what I understand is the momentum at the moment, and that is I think of the whole of the European Community, only two countries

have a licence points totting up system at the present moment, and we are one of those countries.

Mr Colski: I do not know how many do have. I know not everybody does and we do. I thought it was more than two.

Q32 Lord James of Blackheath: I think it is only two that actually take your licence at a certain point at this stage. I think the Italians actually give you a reward if you do not have any points.

Mr Colski: I know the details vary between the 27 states. I do not know what the details are.

Q33 Lord James of Blackheath: There are very, very big variations. The obvious thing to do is to have cross-referencing of every endorsement in every nation in one global European licence and totting system, and that would then mean that there could be no transgressions which are outside ordinary local territory as an excuse for not getting done in the aggregation.

Mr Colski: I think before you could have that sort of system, you would first of all have to have the harmonisation of a points system.

Q34 Lord James of Blackheath: And why not?

Mr Colski: Well, certainly there are no such proposals at the moment. It would be outside the scope of European Community matters, it would be very much into the field of justice and home affairs.

Q35 Lord James of Blackheath: The European Conference on Driving Regulation Harmonisation in Lisbon three weeks ago did not share that view.

Mr Colski: Well, all I can tell you is there are no such proposals at the moment, so nothing is going to happen by 2010.

Q36 Lord James of Blackheath: Well, I think it is something you should be giving some thought to.

Mr Colski: It is for the Commission to bring forward a proposal.

Q37 Lord James of Blackheath: What do you think are the factors which could contribute towards the reduction of the death toll in Europe?

Mr Colski: A number of different things. The position does vary widely across the 27 states. So if you look at the sort of things that have succeeded, we have a mixture of the three Es: engineering, enforcement, education. So you have legislation on things like seatbelts and drink driving; you have enforcement activity to back that up; you have improvements to vehicles and improvements to roads to improve the environment; those are the three broad areas that contribute to road safety. Some Member States have gone a lot further down that road over the last few decades than others and some have had scope to do more in some areas than some in others.

Q38 Lord James of Blackheath: There are several suggestions which have been forthcoming which certainly sound good enough to have further thought. One would be the banning of prescription drugs being sold in petrol stations throughout any part of the motorway system where those prescription drugs have a preponderance of content likely to cause slumber, almost in many cases worse than alcohol. I am thinking particularly of the Kwells travel sickness pill and the cough mixture, two tablespoons of which is the equivalent of half a bottle of whisky.

Mr Colski: I am not an expert on the drug driving side, that is one of my colleagues in the Department. I do know that we will shortly be issuing a consultation paper on compliance with a number of road safety issues, although this is wholly Great Britain, not a European issue, and drug driving will be part of that.

Q39 Lord James of Blackheath: I think that is one that would be well worth your having a look at, because I think there are some dreadful outrages of the availability of some of these drugs, which are appalling. They are very quick to react and very quick to have a downside.

Mr Colski: We are certainly aware of the issue of drug driving, and that does include prescription drugs as well as illegal drugs.

Q40 Lord James of Blackheath: Another one would be the absolute banning of any form of economy by drivers on long haul sleeping in the cab, because it is not the same rest as they get from what they are usually paid to do, which is to take accommodation outside on the long journeys.

Mr Colski: Again, I am not the person who deals with that, so I am afraid I cannot comment, but I can ask my colleagues to let you have some information.

Q41 Lord James of Blackheath: My last question would be: has any thought been given to the mandatory imposition of controls on sat nav systems, which is more into the Greening Transport section, to stop them driving through sectors of the countryside for which the vehicles are themselves unsuitable? In my village recently we had a truck driver coming from Hamburg to Horsham, who succeeded in getting diverted into the tiniest market square in England and the only way out was to demolish the two cottages in the opposing corners to get his truck back out again.

Mr Colski: Again, I am afraid I am not the official that deals with that area, but I am aware that my colleagues who do will have something to tell you, and I will find out what they have to say.

Q42 Lord James of Blackheath: There is a cause for concern that needs to be looked at. I do not think I am going to get very far with you, but I would just like to say that I think there are some very serious questions that need to be thought about there.

Mr Colski: I am sure people are thinking about them.

Chairman: We will come back to that. Lord Walpole?

Q43 Lord Walpole: Yes, I gather the Government has announced recently a review of traffic signs in the UK. To what extent is this related to European initiatives or to the existing shambles that it is?

Mr Hanson: I think we might dispute that, we think actually we have quite a robust traffic sign system, but we are preparing to undertake a wide-ranging review at the moment, which is primarily to update the British system to meet the needs of the road user. To that degree, it is not taking on board European initiatives, but there are not any which particularly drive this review.

Q44 Lord Walpole: Are you anti-Europe, or do you not feel that it is a good idea that there should be the same type of road signs throughout the whole of Europe? That is something I personally would like to see.

Mr Hanson: We would say there are a lot of similarities in conventions of road traffic signs. The 1968 Vienna Convention provided for a lot of the road signs which we know and understand, and we are not looking at altering those or providing changes. This is a policy review, and it will not be affecting the actual design of safety critical signs.

Q45 Lord Walpole: I just think from whenever you did your last effort, not very long ago, I find it so much more difficult to drive around than I used to. I am actually ex-Head of Planning and Transportation in Norfolk County Council many years ago, when we actually

got it right throughout the whole county, but practically every single signpost has been changed, altered or removed, and when I ask why, they say, “Signposts, they are for traffic management”. Signposts are not for traffic management. Signposts are to tell people which way to go when they want to go somewhere. That is not traffic management.

Mr Hanson: Well, in terms of direction and guidance, what the review will be doing is looking to talk to users, the RAC, motorists, enforcement agencies, as well as local authorities, about how they actually see the framework we are providing working, and how we can actually change that to provide real changes on the ground. One thing we are stressing about this review is it is not a regulatory update, which many reviews have been for traffic signs. This is actually a wide-ranging review which is going to look at the root and branch of all traffic signs, how they operate, how they function and how they are delivered on the ground. There may well be some substantial changes to the system arising from this review.

Lord Walpole: I hope there are. Having driven as long as I have and having got one speeding fine, for on a Sunday going down a dual carriageway, admittedly in an urban area, and not realising, because the lorry in front of me was so big I could not see a road sign, and there were not enough repeaters, whether I was in a 30 or a 40 zone. In the old days they got everywhere, but you had to have a 30 mile an hour speed limit every so often, you had to have a 40 every so often. At least you knew what you were trying to do. But if they hide them up behind large lorries, large lorries always hide them up, do they not, if you are not in the slow lane, it is a shambles. A lot more thought has to be given to this. Things like going round towns; it is very nice to be able to go round Bedford, I am sure you all go round Bedford in your life, I would not advise anyone to try it though, and get in and out the way you want to. You cannot. I cannot, and I know Bedford very well. So I go through the middle. You want me to go round the outside, of course you do, but I have learnt through bitter experience that

if you do, you get lost, so I go through the middle again, as I always used to. Sorry, My Lord Chairman, I do get very, very cross about this.

Chairman: You obviously do. Lord Dykes?

Q46 Lord Dykes: Thank you, My Lord Chairman. I will try and be less emotional. You were quite right, I think, in inferring that since the Vienna Agreement, there has been quite an enormously spectacular harmonisation throughout Europe really of what I would call the round circle signs.

Mr Hanson: Regulatory signs.

Q47 Lord Dykes: Yes, that is the technical term. If you take the geographical direction signs in each country, those much more still reside back in the national systems and also indeed local authorities, regional government and so on, like motorway sign colours are different in different countries, as we know. Presumably your review would not include those, because you just concentrate on the first ones, the regulatory signs that you have mentioned, or can you go into the other areas as well?

Mr Hanson: It is difficult for me to say, because we are just at the start of the process which we are publicising very clearly as we will look at all issues which are brought to us and consider what the outcomes are, but we must also remember, in terms of that, I think we have a very reasonable traffic sign system. How it is delivered is a different matter and the issue about how local authorities and other agencies deliver on the ground, but in providing very clear messages and very clear signing through our regulations, I think we actually have a fairly robust set of regulations which people understand. So if we were to make significant changes to signs that people understand, there would have to be a very good reason, and that is for the review to determine and consider.

Q48 Lord Dykes: Coming back to that then finally, you agree that your first cluster, the important ones from your point of view where the harmonisation has been quite appreciable, the colour harmonisation has also been considerable, has it not?

Mr Hanson: Yes.

Q49 Lord Dykes: But in the second category, that is much harder to achieve everywhere, is it not?

Mr Hanson: It is, because these systems evolve naturally, and obviously we have different road systems and different road markings. In this country, we have motorways, A roads, principal roads, which is not necessarily harmonised through Europe, so actually having that harmonisation is quite difficult.

Q50 Chairman: I would ask, lastly, that when you go to consultation with the RAC, and trade associations and local authorities, do have some consultation with the average person, because you get from organisations organisational views, they may not represent what the average person thinks, and I think that would be worthwhile. But I would also like to see some details about road accidents and trends please.

Mr Colski: I am happy to do that. There was a 7 or 8 per cent fall in the number of deaths in Great Britain in 2007 compared with the previous year, so although there was a levelling off in the earlier part of this decade, certainly since about 2003/2004, we have seen a downward trend again.

Q51 Lord Dykes: To be fair to the Department, one of the great problems has always been the speeding issue, and that presumably applies much more to personal motorists rather than to commercial vehicles, that is generally accepted. Are there any exceptions to that in recent times in terms of particularly bad accidents caused by heavy commercial vehicles?

Mr Colski: I could not comment on individual cases. We tend to look at the figures in aggregate across the country as a whole. Although we do have certain research projects that look in more detail at particular cases, I do not have that information with me here at the moment. I mean, again, it is probably something we could give more information on.

Q52 Chairman: We are just about to finish. One thing I would also ask that you address in any communication you have with us is the question of mirrors on left-hand drive vehicles. There is quite a lot of evidence of people being killed and seriously injured because the driver cannot see them.

Mr Colski: Again, that is an area where we can give you further information, although I do not have it with me today.

Mr Paterson: Can I just emphasise, part of the difficulty is that this transcends the Greening Transport Package as such. A number of the questions you are asking about road safety obviously we will answer, but they are not contained in the package as such, which is why we are perhaps not able to answer all your questions on road safety today.

Chairman: I realise they are not, but a lot of these things I have raised affect our relationships with the European Union, because a lot of the incidents are caused by lorries from the European Union. Thank you very much. This session is now closed.