



accidents don't have to happen

Road Collision Reporting Guidelines

RoSPA's response to the Active Travel Academy's consultation

Date: October 2020



Response to Active Travel Academy's consultation: Road Collision Reporting Guidelines

Introduction

This is the response of The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) to the Active Travel Academy's consultation on the draft Road Collision Reporting Guidelines. It has been produced following consultation with RoSPA's National Road Safety Committee, but does not necessarily reflect the views of all committee members.

The Active Travel Academy are consulting on draft road collision reporting guidelines to understand how they may affect interested parties and to receive suggestions for improvements.



Response to Active Travel Academy's consultation: Road Collision Reporting Guidelines

Consultation questions

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The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA)

Do you agree with the principles of the Road Collision Reporting Guidelines?

RoSPA response

RoSPA partially agree with the principles of the Road Collision Reporting Guidelines.

RoSPA recognise the importance of impartiality. The guidelines state that “publishers must not use the term accident when describing road collisions – collision, or crash, are more accurate, especially when the facts of the incident are not known.” We agree that publishers should avoid representing collisions as an inevitable event that could not be prevented, as over 90% of crashes will involve some element of human error, either in the form of careless and dangerous behaviour, or in the form of mistakes and misjudgements, although other factors may contribute, however this can be done without urging the use of words other than accident.

To our knowledge, there exists no research or insight into people’s understanding of the word accident and whether it has any impact on people’s perceptions of road safety and the causes of collisions. Therefore, those campaigns which seek to remove the word accident from the lexicon of road safety are based on arbitrary and under-researched reasons. While the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definition does make reference to accidents being incidents that happen by chance, it states that an accident is also something that can happen “unintentionally, or unexpectedly”; this has long been the definition and not, as stated in the draft guidelines, that something is “unavoidable”. As RoSPA clearly states, accidents don’t have to happen (a tagline produced following extensive consultation) and “accident prevention” has been a widely understood concept for the public, within the public health arena and within occupational and professional health and safety, including for road safety professionals, for many decades; the idiom “an accident waiting to happen” is extremely common in the UK and beyond.



Response to Active Travel Academy's consultation: Road Collision Reporting Guidelines

RoSPA agree with the principle outlined on discrimination, that is, publishers must avoid using negative generalisations of road users, and must not use dehumanising language or that which may incite violence or hatred against a road user in comment and news coverage. We agree that coverage, must not encourage, joke, or make light of injury or danger to other road users, particularly vulnerable road users, or suggest certain road users are an annoyance, aren't legitimate road users, or should have their lawful activities otherwise curtailed.

RoSPA also strongly agree with the principle that coverage of perceived risks on the roads should be above all accurate, based in fact and context and should not be sensationalised in any way. Official statistics should be drawn upon where required. Statistics should be accurate and verified, and facts clearly explained with important limitations explained.

The reporting of risk impacts the public's perception of that risk, and overemphasising the risks of cycling and walking, say, or underestimating the risk caused by poor driving may alter the public's behaviour in a way that negatively impacts theirs or others' health. We also agree that although RoSPA recommend the use of personal protective equipment, except when demonstrably relevant, publishers should avoid reference to whether equipment such as hi-vis and helmets were worn at the time of the incident. Publishers should give reasonable consideration to whether inclusion of this information amounts to victim blaming in their absence.

Finally, RoSPA strongly agree that publishers must avoid portraying dangerous or criminal behaviour on the roads as acceptable, or those caught breaking the law as victims. It is vital that practices, such as, for example, speeding are not glamorised in any way. Using language that downplays or minimises the seriousness of offending is likely to have an adverse impact in encouraging the acceptance of such law-breaking by society. RoSPA also agree that it is good practice, when covering road safety or road collisions to contact road safety organisations. Their expertise can inform journalists on elements of road safety, and give context of the wider issues and trends locally and nationally.

How do you predict the Reporting Guidelines will affect you or your industry?

RoSPA response

The way that incidents are reported in the media can have a positive or negative effect on road safety. RoSPA hope that if these guidelines are widely distributed and followed, there could be positive effects for the road safety industry.

The media influences people's knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. Social media, television, radio and print media constantly show people driving, riding and walking in all sorts of articles, posts, programmes and advertisements. These media outlets either show people using the road in a safe or unsafe way.

Positive images showing safe behaviour may help to prevent collisions and even save lives. Images showing poor or dangerous behaviour may, inadvertently, have the opposite effect. For example, a news item intended to highlight a road safety issue can give the opposite visual message if it shows a reporter driving while talking to a



Response to Active Travel Academy's consultation: Road Collision Reporting Guidelines

camera. Glamourising dangerous behaviour should be avoided, and as far as possible, the consequences of dangerous behaviour should be shown. Very often, checking minor details that in most cases will make little or no difference to a news story, may make a big difference to a viewer or reader's attitude.

What, if any, changes would you like to see to the Reporting Guidelines?

RoSPA response

RoSPA believes that the guidelines apply well to direct reporting of collisions, but the guidelines do not address more modern methods of journalism, such as user generated content. It is now very common now for traditional forms of media, such as newspapers to include reader videos and pictures in articles, especially online and on social media. Therefore, RoSPA believes that the following should be added to section four of the guidelines:

“Publishers, particularly those that pay readers for their pictures and videos, should be very mindful of user generated content, especially avoiding using anything that has been filmed or captured by someone who is clearly behind the wheel of a vehicle, as this normalises this kind of behaviour.”

RoSPA has no further comments to make on the consultation process, other than to thank the Active Travel Academy for the opportunity to comment. We have no objection to our response being reproduced or attributed.

