

DUAL THE A1

ANALYSIS OF DATA ON ACCIDENTS ON THE A1 BETWEEN MORPETH AND THE SCOTTISH BORDER

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With thanks to all the volunteers who helped to collect the data and who campaign to improve safety on the A1 from Morpeth to the Border.

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ANALYSIS OF ACCIDENT DATA January 2010

FOREWORD

BY ANNE-MARIE TREVELYAN, FOUNDER AND CO-ORDINATOR, A1 ACTION GROUP

Our campaign to dual the A1 is focused, at this stage, on getting the road back onto the UK National Strategic Road Network. In 2004, Labour downgraded the A1 between Morpeth and Scotland from being a road of national importance, as part of the Strategic Road Network, to being one of merely *regional* importance. Whitehall says that before the road can be considered for reclassification and be upgraded:

- Average daily traffic flow must be in excess of 60,000 vehicles.
- The road must link two of the top 20 English cities, or link one such city to an airport or seaport or to Scotland or Wales.
- Traffic must consist of at least 15% HGVs along the entire length of the route.

It is the claim that the road is not dangerous enough to warrant improvement that is, in my experience, the one that most angers local people and users from around the UK who travel through Northumberland on the A1.

This first report, commissioned by the A1 Action Group, analyses the claim of this Labour Government that the A1 is not more dangerous than comparable roads. We have studied the accident record since 2004 and found problems in how information is presented to Whitehall. The way in which the severity of accidents is classified is highly questionable. For example, if three people die in hospital following an accident, rather than at the scene, that accident is not deemed to be 'fatal'. Or if a car overturns and ends up on the central reservation, but by the grace of God no one needs hospital treatment at the time, that accident is classified as 'slight'. Vital police notes made at the scene of the accident are left out in summary data sent to Whitehall because they do not fit the statistical boxes Labour sets for analysing serious accidents. Civil servants assessing the safety of the A1 are working from misleading, inadequate information.

Police notes also show that many accidents take place near junctions. This data is also lost, because a junction is not recorded as a factor in the accident record unless the collision happens within 50 metres of it. Local people are familiar with the small tracks leading onto and from the A1, and with the poor visibility of traffic in both directions. It is beyond doubt that accidents are caused by vehicles coming onto or leaving the road, often needing to cross both lanes. However, this cause of accidents is systematically excluded from Government statistics.

A substantial majority of accidents happen in fine weather and good light. External conditions are not causing accidents; *the layout of the road is*. Improvement to the road will prevent more accidents than on other roads that appear to be more dangerous in official statistics. I have written to Lord Adonis, Labour's Secretary of State for Transport, to discuss these findings and find a way to move toward for dualling the A1.



Anne-Marie Trevelyan

ABSTRACT

This report evaluates the context of accidents on the A1 between Morpeth and the Scottish Border. It analyses a data set recording these accidents - a data set upon which policy on upgrading the road is determined. Two conclusions are drawn.

Firstly, a limited and misleading data set is available to Whitehall for the purpose of determining whether the road should be upgraded. A wider range of evidence should be included in the decision-making process, including police reports and records of what happens to accident victims once they leave the scene of the accident.

Secondly, no dramatic variance in accident rates is caused by 'external conditions', such as weather conditions or drink driving. External conditions do not account for the location and timing of accidents. The layout of the road is, in the view of this report, by far the single greatest cause of accidents.

These conclusions suggest that records of 'serious' accidents, upon which the case for dualling has been rejected, are flawed and misleading. An upgrade to the A1 is likely to prevent more accidents, and save more lives, than the upgrading of highways where road layout is a less significant cause of accidents.

PART 1: PROBLEMS WITH THE OFFICIAL DATA

When is a fatal accident not a fatal accident?

The classification of accidents used by the Government to analyse road safety (see appendix, Figure 1) does not reflect the nature of accidents. According to these statistics, a 'slight' accident is one where no ambulance is called, and a 'serious' accident is one where an ambulance takes a casualty to hospital. A fatal accident is only recorded as such where death occurs at the scene of the accident. The police records that these figures arise from are made at the scene of a crash and cannot be amended if the victim's health worsens or they die in hospital. So if someone in an accident on the A1 dies on arrival at hospital, the crash is not recorded as being fatal.

Decision makers at Whitehall must go beneath the surface of basic data, which is providing a false impression of the number of fatalities and serious accidents along our stretch of the A1.

Is an overturned car a 'slight' accident?

Police make detailed notes at the scene of an accident. However, the records sent to the civil servants who make decisions on road improvement ignore the details recorded by police, because events are summarised into three simplistic categories (see Figure 1). For example, a 'slight' accident may be dramatic, traumatic and cause enormous disruption, such as where cars flip over or end up on the central reservation.

The official data suggests that only 16.5% of accidents are serious and that only 4% of these are fatal. We believe that this underestimates the real dangers of a life threatening accident on the A1.

Is it really true that accidents are not caused by cars coming onto and leaving the single carriageway?

Police notes often explain that an accident is due to vehicles coming on or off one of the many small junctions on the A1. However, if an accident occurs more than 50 metres from a junction, the data sent to Whitehall makes no reference to it. The data therefore implies that there are no major safety issues regarding the many small roads leading onto and off the single carriageway. It might be that a collision does not occur until 63 metres from the turning, yet the true reason for the collision is not recorded correctly.

Police notes show that the official data is not reflecting the true reasons for collisions. Anyone using the road regularly knows how difficult it is to get onto and off the single carriageway, often involving crossing to the opposite side of the road from country tracks with obstructed visibility.

The information on accidents currently sent to Whitehall underplays the danger of the small roads leading onto and away from the A1.

PART 2: WHAT REALLY CAUSES CRASHES: THE ROAD LAYOUT

The problem is the road, not the conditions

Official data (see appendix, Figures 2-8) shows that 'external' conditions are not the main cause of accidents on the A1 in North Northumberland. Weather conditions, wind levels, alcohol, or the time of day or of the year do not explain the rate and distribution of accidents. Indeed, one of the safest times to travel is early on a dark, foggy and windy Thursday morning. Variable road conditions are not the main cause of accidents. The layout of the road is.

When weather is wet, snowy, foggy, or with high winds, the risk of using the A1 is lower. 82% of accidents happen in fine weather. 91.5% occur when there is no wind and 61% when the roads are dry. This pattern is likely due to drivers being more cautious in bad conditions. Furthermore, only 3% of drivers involved in accidents are over the limit when breathalysed.

The data reveals a gendered pattern in the cause of accidents. 73.2% of accidents are caused by male drivers and 90% of fatal accidents, with 36% of these being caused by men aged between 31-40 years old. 90% of all serious accidents recorded are also caused by a male driver. This seems to corroborate anecdotal evidence that men are more likely to be frustrated by slow moving traffic and enticed into risky overtaking.

CONCLUSION

The data informing the decision not to dual the A1 is flawed. Important information is lost when the detailed evidence of police officers is condensed into blunt statistics. The presentation of the data underplays dangers that arise specifically from the layout of the road. This weakens the case for upgrading a road with safety issues arising not from variable conditions, but rather from dips, bends, transitions between single and dual carriageway and small junctions with poor visibility.