

TRL's report into the MOT – not all 'good news' for Minister Hammond

Be careful what you wish for...

When a Transport Research Laboratory (TRL) report projected lower deaths and injuries from reduced MOT Testing compared to the DfT's 2008 figures, Secretary of State for Transport Philip Hammond used it to justify recommending 4-2-1 MOT Testing. But TRL's underlying message is clear – "less frequent MOTs means more MOT failures, more accidents, more deaths, more serious injuries". Minister Penning says, if more people were likely to die with less frequent MOT's, "I wouldn't do it!" Read the whole report Mr Penning – and don't do it!

A Crystal ball...

Predicting increased road accidents from less frequent MOTs is difficult. You need a 'mathematical model', projecting the future. What will motorists do? Will they be conscientious about their car's condition in non-MOT years? But what about MOT items not checked during a service; headlamp aim, suspension and steering, seat belts, and so on?

Inevitably you make assumptions and work from there. First, though, you need data – TRL's starting point.

From the horse's mouth – more failures and/or more defects?

We contacted Cuerden, the TRL report's author, and he generously agreed to meet us and discuss his work in detail.

Cuerden first explained that using data, he explored what proportion of road accidents result from vehicle defects, concluding that about 3% of all accidents in Britain had a vehicle defect as a contributory factor, conceding though, that's not an incontrovertible figure.

He then considered how defects develop in vehicles during years when there was no MOT, to try and predict increased MOT failure rates with less frequent Testing. Those extra failures could then be 'fed in' to that 3% accident rate to predict increased road accidents, deaths and serious injuries.

But a higher failure rate isn't the whole story. Say it doubles – does that mean twice as many accidents? Not necessarily; it could *more* than double. The likelihood of accidents significantly increases if the average

number of defects in each failed car increases – it's not just about failure numbers.

So a doubled failure rate could mean a more than doubling of accidents because the total defects (the underlying cause of defect-related accidents) may have more than doubled.

Cuerden understands this, but unable to realistically estimate the increased total defects, he based his calculations on projected increased failure rates during non-MOT Test years – a conservative approach.

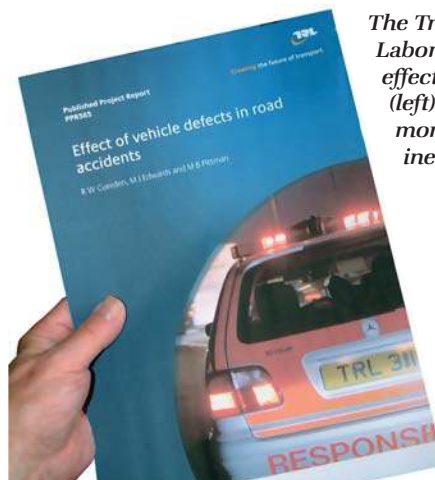
Inevitably, as Cuerden confirmed, his 'model' is, "...likely to underestimate the accident outcomes". Something Hammond didn't mention in his press briefing!

How drivers behave...

Britain's failure rate for the first MOT Test at a vehicle's third 'birthday' is less than in France's at four years old because French Testing stations are 'stand alone' and don't do repairs. Motorists get their cars fixed before the 'MOT' to avoid a double journey. This shows that motorists' behaviour affects failure rates.

Cuerden pondered how motorists would behave during non-MOT years. He made two assumptions, and worked out what MOT failure rates would result from each. First he assumed that half of all motorists conscientiously looked after their cars during non-MOT years – and alternatively that all motorists did nothing.

Yet there's a buried issue here. A service doesn't substitute for an MOT. Headlamp beam aim isn't checked, or suspension and steering, or seat belts,



The Transport Research Laboratory's report into the effects of less frequent MOTs (left) unequivocally says more road accidents will inevitably result.



Author Richard Cuerden: the report is "likely to underestimate the accident outcomes".

According to whether all, or just 50% of motorists are careless of vehicle 'MOT maintenance', here are Cuerden's failure estimates for the first two MOTs in a 4-2-1 testing regime.

PROJECTED FAILURE RATE: 4-2-1 TEST REGIME

Year of Test:	First MOT at Year 4	Second MOT at Year 6
High prediction	46.9% (25.5%)	67.5% (36.3%)
Low prediction	36.2% (25.5%)	51.9% (36.3%)

Note: Current failure rates in 3-1-1 Testing in brackets.

or emissions. So even Cuerden's conscientious motorist's vehicles aren't checked to full MOT standard.

Cuerden, however, dismisses this, saying "most defects relating to accidents would be picked up on a good service..." He may be right; he could also be wrong.

Less frequent MOTs = more road accidents, deaths and casualties

It is easy to argue the differences between the DfT's 2008 report predicting high death rates with less frequent MOTs, and the TRL report's less pessimistic view. But Cuerden consistently says that less frequent MOTs inevitably means more road accidents.

From the TRL report:

"The larger the time gap between MOT Testing intervals, the larger the predicted number of additional accidents and casualties which may be attributed to vehicle defect contributory factors"

"reducing the frequency of testing for newer vehicles is likely to have adverse road safety consequences, but these would be substantially greater for older vehicles..."

"Although the theoretical models are not ideal, largely due to a lack of data upon which assumptions have been based, they consistently indicated an increase in accidents and casualties. However, it must be stressed that these are estimates only..."

Unacceptable failure rates...

Penning, Hammond and his Senior officials seem to have overlooked (or purposely

ignored!) the escalating MOT failure rates predicted by TRL.

If, buts and maybes...

We doubt Cuerden would consider his findings as 'evidence'; as described by Ministers – he would probably consider it a heresy to describe them in those terms.

His 'findings' are projections, which may, or may not, apply in real life. The TRL report is bounded with 'bodyguards' of doubts, uncertainties and caveats. A reasonable 'crystal ball' perhaps, but a crystal ball nevertheless!

At the April Trade Forum meeting Cuerden came as close as a person can to saying, "Ministers should not use the findings of this report as a basis for future MOT policy", without using those actual words.

These 'ifs, buts and maybes' don't flaw, or rubbish the report, they simply put it into context as one way of predicting the outcome of reduced MOT frequency using a specific mathematical model.

A damning indictment!

The TRL report is a damning indictment of reducing MOT Testing frequency. It predicts unequivocally that less frequent MOTs = more deaths and injuries.

It begs the question, "how many more deaths and injuries would Penning and Hammond accept to gain popularity by saving motorists a few quid?"

That's the real issue this report from a respected institution has highlighted... not at all what Penning and Hammond had in mind.