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Latest Motor Industry News

This Week's Briefing

Work perk taken for granted as drivers abuse company cars

Congestion to soar as road investment fails to match car use

Poor marketing stalls electric car take-up, says new report

Businesses fail to monitor driver behaviour, claims survey

Saab's future on a knife edge as sale negotiations continue

Fleet operators must carefully spec vehicles to maximise RVs

Diesel prices rise but there's respite for petrol drivers

Model update: Audi, BMW, Lexus, Por-

The Editor's View

A NIGHTMARE picture of traffic congestion across the UK has been painted in a new RAC Foundation report. The UK's roads are predicted to have to cope with a further four million cars in the next 25 years. That, says the report, means a 50% rise in average traffic delays and a huge impact on businesses. Against that background, Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne will outline his plans to get Britain moving in the Government's Autumn Statement on Tuesday (November 29). With the economy stuttering to a halt, the Government is being urged to consider introducing 'express lanes' alongside busy sections of motorways and trunk roads. Drivers would be billed per journey. That sounds like tolls roads, which the Government is opposed to. However, it is claimed that the Government's opposition to tolling only relates to 'existing roads' and not 'new capacity'. Advocates say cash should be found for planned but currently unfunded roads with building work creating many new jobs. Tolls roads, therefore, could provide the answer to Britain's woes.

Fleet file

Health experts call to include work-related RTAs in official figures

A HEALTH and safety body is urging the Government to incorporate work-related road traffic accidents (RTAs) into official statistics.

The Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) made the call on World Day of Remembrance for Road Traffic Victims (Sunday, November 20).

As the world's largest organisation for safety professionals with 39,000 members, IOSH wants to see work-related RTAs recorded and recognised under RIDDOR (Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 1995).

IOSH is the latest organisation to call for work-related RTAs to be reported under RIDDOR regulations - a call that has to-date fallen on deaf ears within Government and the Health and Safety Executive.

Richard Jones, head of policy and public affairs at IOSH, said: 'Each and every death or serious injury on the road is a cause of deep regret. Nationally, we need to do more to improve our management of work-related road risk and prevent accidents. Employers have a moral and legal responsibility to look after their employees every mile of their business trips.

'If the Government insisted work-related road traffic accidents were reported as part of RIDDOR, employers would know more detail about accidents that commonly take place. As a result of knowing more, companies will be able to act on the causes of the accidents and work to reduce them.'

It's estimated that 1.3 million people across the world lost their lives on the roads this year, and millions more were injured. Statistics show that in the UK alone one-in-three company drivers has an accident each year, and up to a third of UK RTAs are work-related.

Jones added: 'Work-related accidents make up a large percentage of the total number of RTAs in the UK - this doesn't need to be the case.

'Some of the most common causes of work-related RTAs are distraction, fatigue and time pressure. Where possible, employers should be encouraging employees to drive less by using technology instead of travelling to meetings, or offering the use of public transport, pairing up with other team members or even staying overnight. Employers expecting employees to drive as part of their job need to assess driver ability, provide good training and be flexible when it comes to travel times.'

Work perk taken for granted as drivers abuse company cars

DRIVERS behave differently when driving a company car rather than their own vehicle with risk taking to the fore, according to research by comparison website Uswitch.

Two thirds (67%) of drivers are more likely to take bigger risks when they're driving a company car, while over half (52%) are more likely to speed than when driving their own car.

Additionally, 67% are also more likely to lane hop in company cars while more than six in ten (62%) say they're more likely to jump the lights. And despite the dangers and the fact that it's illegal, over eight in ten (83%) are more likely to use a mobile in their company car.

With employers having to foot the bill for any repairs, drivers are also less likely to worry about the general wear and tear of their company car. Less than three in ten (27%) are more worried about knocking or scratching their work car than their personal car and less than a quarter (24%) bother to check the oil or water.

And although employees are being trusted by their employer to look after the car, just a fifth (21%) are concerned about the security of their work vehicle more than their personal one.

The research also shows that when it comes to keeping their cars clean and well looked after drivers don't worry as much about the company vehicle. Even though they are representing their business in their company car, over half of workers (53%) are more likely to litter it, while six in ten (60%) are more likely to eat and drink in it than in their own car.

Michael Ossei, personal finance expert at uSwitch.com, said: 'A company car is a real perk, especially for cash strapped consumers. Unfortunately our research shows that some drivers aren't just using it, but are guilty of abusing it, treating their work car very differently to their own car which is funded out of their own pocket.

'But a company car doesn't give you carte blanche for risky driving - taking liberties with your company car could not only drive your boss round the bend, but also insurance premiums up.'

Businesses fail to monitor driver behaviour, claims survey

ONLY one in six UK businesses is actively monitoring their employees' driving behaviour, potentially, exposing 84% of companies to unnecessary levels of risk and cost, according to a survey of financial directors by ALD Automotive.

As the multi-vehicle accident on the M5 earlier this month illustrated, driving on business continues to demand the highest levels of occupational road risk management.

With winter approaching, businesses are being reminded about the need not only to have an appropriate policy in place, but also to proactively monitor the performance of work-related road safety on a regular basis.

Businesses that can identify poor driving behaviour such as harsh acceleration, braking or excessive speeding can then implement specific measures to help improve their employees' driving style and reduce the associated risk.

Without such monitoring, however, companies potentially leave themselves at risk from prosecution, besides the financial impact from poor fuel consumption and higher running costs, according to ALD Automotive.

Keith Allen, managing director of ALD Automotive (UK), said: 'It's in the interest of every business to ensure that employees driving on work-related journeys are driving in a way which minimises the risk and cost to both themselves and to the company.

'Technology, and in particular telematics, can play a significant part in identifying employees potentially at risk and using the reporting available businesses can then take the necessary steps to implement change.'

Fleet Influence joins the Clifford Thames Group

FLEET Influence, the fleet industry data provider and consultancy specialists, has been acquired by the Clifford Thames Group for an undisclosed amount.

Clifford Thames is a technology and outsourcing partner to the automotive aftermarket, working with repair outlets, vehicle manufacturers and leasing companies.

The addition of Fleet Influence to the Clifford Thames Group will help to further its rapid expansion presently underway in the UK and continental Europe fleet markets.

Fleet Influence directors, Stephen Dilley, Brian Jameson and Andrew Wright - all well known figures in the fleet industry - will join the Clifford Thames fleet executive committee to assist with the launch of a range of new initiatives.

'The focus, expertise and talent of Fleet Influence fits exceptionally well within the Clifford Thames structure,' said Dilley. 'In return, Clifford Thames has an amazing wealth of knowledge and experience built over many years.

'It also has proven systems and data capabilities which will enable Fleet Influence to quickly deliver an ever stronger proposition to its growing client base.'

To date, Fleet Influence has specialised in two main areas: the provision of fleet data services and systems to the automotive industry and the delivery of specialist consultancy and training facilities to its clients.

Wright said: 'The links with Clifford Thames are very exciting. Clifford Thames has long established and well received product and service offerings, which are currently not available in the fleet arena. We know that many of these will transfer easily, and be very valuable to fleets and those who service them.'

David Riemenschneider, Clifford Thames Group CEO, added: 'The addition of Fleet Influence to the Group is another step to strengthen our expertise and expand in the fleet segment. We plan to put our resources behind the team to further expand the Fleet Influence reach.'

Ogilvie launches winter tyre solution for leased company vehicles

OGILVIE Fleet is offering customers the opportunity to have winter tyres fitted to cars and vans with the cost included within their full maintenance contract hire package.

How contract hire companies would flex monthly lease agreements to accommodate customer requests for winter tyres, also known as cold weather tyres, has been an industry issue as fleet demand has increased following two consecutive hazardous winters on the roads.

Now Ogilvie Fleet believes it is the first leasing provider to launch a solution. It is giving customers the option to either:

- Incorporate the cost of a full set of winter tyres into the full maintenance contract hire rate for the fleet lifecycle of individual vehicles; or
- Pay the full cost of a set of winter tyres upfront.

Once the initial set of winter tyres is paid for, they will be covered within Ogilvie Fleet's standard 'no quibble' tyre policy.

Ogilvie Fleet's tyre repair and replacement agreement with Kwik-Fit Fleet enables customers to store winter/summer tyres when not in use in the fast-fit giant's tyre 'hotel' at a cost of £10 per tyre per season including valve and balancing when required at time of fitment.

When the changeover from summer to winter/winter to summer tyres is required, Kwik Fit Fleet will require a 48 hours notice to recall the stored tyres and facilitate the work

Ogilvie Fleet sales and marketing director Nick Hardy said: 'We have been inundated with requests and information on winter tyres by customers and believe we are the first leasing company to incorporate a winter tyre option into a standard contract hire package.

'For many fleets winter tyres are an expensive step into the unknown so take-up has been limited, but we believe our solution to offset their cost over a vehicle's lifecycle opens the door for many companies to fit winter tyres to their cars and vans.

'Vehicles fitted with winter tyres from new will have the winter tyres replaced with a like-for-like or similar product subject to availability at the time of replacement under the contact at no extra cost.

'Vehicles that have standard tyres fitted at the outset of the contract and have a second set of winter tyres supplied subsequently, for periods of bad weather, at the customer's initial expense, will have normal tyre management cover for the periods when the winter tyres are fitted which will include wear and tear and unrepairable punctures.'

However, while tyre manufacturers and suppliers as well as vehicle manufacturers have been busy promoting the safety benefits of winter tyres, specifically in relation to stopping distances, Ogilvie Fleet warns:

- Winter tyres do not guarantee mobility in winter conditions
- Not all vehicles are suitable to have winter tyres fitted
- Winter tyres are a considerable cost and are often difficult to source, if not impossible, in selected sizes
- Vehicles fitted with run flat tyres cannot be fitted with standard winter tyres without another set of wheels

- Punctured and damaged winter tyres cannot be repaired and must be replaced. With limited supply of winter tyres a replacement tyre may be difficult to source which could lead to vehicles being off the road for longer periods than usual

Meanwhile, Ogilvie Fleet is to monitor the performance, value, fuel efficiency and the 'trials and tribulations' of driving a car fitted with winter tyres.

National sales manager Ashley Crookes (pictured) has equipped his BMW 318d M Sport with winter tyres and will report on 'living with them' in a regular blog on the company's website - http://www.ogilvie-fleet.co.uk/blog

Hardy said: 'Winter tyres are more expensive than standard tyres with a set of four for the BMW costing £895. We are keen to obtain first hand knowledge of their performance - on wet, snow and ice-covered roads as well as on dry roads - and use that information to help our customers make their choices.'

Fleet operators get screen safety checks ready for winter

TRANSPORT operators are so concerned about ensuring that their vehicles are ready for extreme winter weather that they are also including their staff's personal vehicles in windscreen safety checks, according to National Mobile Windscreens

Amey, which has depots in Birmingham, is the latest operator to invite National Mobile Windscreens' experts to check their staff's vehicles for glass defects.

Amey is responsible for improving and maintaining Birmingham Highways infrastructure, including 2,500km of road network, nearly 100,000 street lights, as well as over 850 highway structures and bridges across the city, in partnership with Birmingham City Council.

More than 150 staff cars were examined by the National Mobile Windscreens team from the Birmingham branch at Phoenix Park, Avenue Road in Aston.

'Generally we find that around one fifth of the vehicles that we examine require either glass replacement or repair,' said Martyn Bennett, sales and marketing director.

'In this case, the figure was considerably lower and only a few staff cars needed attention,' he said.

'But this figure can be higher for private motorists who may be finding it difficult to keep pace with the cost of motoring, or the smaller fleet operators struggling to stay competitive.

'Many of the defects we have found require immediate attention, while many others can lead to a glass failure if repairs or replacement are delayed much longer.'

National Mobile Windscreens say that some fleet operators may be reluctant to spend time carrying out general safety inspections on their vehicles, or may be postponing any repair work because of their demanding work schedules.

'We included our staff cars in the safety check because we believe that it is important to identify any vehicle glass defect and to delay any repair or replacement is a false economy,' said Amey transport manager Tony Mathews.

'A damaged windscreen can fail at any time and our staff knows that it is better to have the work carried out when it is convenient rather than as a last-minute emergency.'

- ***Photo caption (left to right): John Shoer, National Mobile Windscreens' branch manager, Carly Weston, vehicle glass repair technician and Kevin Jones, operational support engineer with the Amey staff's vehicles.***

IFS champions solar energy use through EV and panel project

INCHCAPE Fleet Solutions has underlined its environmental commitment by embarking on a significant solar energy project.

By installing an array of photovoltaic solar panels at its headquarters in Haven House, Portsmouth, which will be used both to generate electricity for the office of around 170 employees and to power an electric vehicle, the company plans to showcase the wider suitability of solar power for the motor industry.

Following a supplier review, Buckinghamshire-based Ardenham Energy, a well-established renewable energy system installer, was selected to fit the solar panels, with a Smart fortwo electric vehicle provided by Mercedes-Benz UK.

The system, it is claimed, will enable Inchcape Fleet Solutions to make considerable cost savings, reducing its environmental impact as a result.

The panels will generate on average a minimum of 29,430kWhrs per annum - the equivalent annual electricity consumption of approximately eight family houses.

Furthermore, based on today’s energy rates, it will save Inchcape Fleet Solutions an estimated £12,000 per annum and, as early adopters, the company has locked into the 25-year Government guaranteed RPI-linked Feed-in Tariff returns meaning savings potentially rising to over £20,000.

Inchcape Fleet Solutions’ finance and business intelligence director, Gary Woodcock said: ‘Every company, no matter its standing in the corporate hierarchy, has a responsibility to reduce carbon emissions and operate in a more efficient manner.

‘By undertaking this project, I believe we are making a significant statement to our current and future customer base, making clear that we are dedicated to playing our part in carbon reduction and will constantly evaluate our processes to this effect.’

Commenting on the electric vehicle, Woodcock said: ‘With oil prices at a record high, showing no signs of an immediate drop, motorists and businesses alike are seeking cheaper ways to run their vehicles.

‘Solar energy is a fantastic way to offset the cost of running an office and indeed any electricity-dependent appliance, in this case an electric vehicle. The pace of development on alternative fuelled vehicles is staggering and on behalf of our customers we need to be involved at the cutting edge of this technology.

‘The addition of our solar panel array and Smart fortwo electric vehicle will allow us to evaluate the suitability of electric vehicles in the business arena and calculate whole life costs, to compare just how much money can be saved by running an electric vehicle on solar energy, compared to conventional electricity and fossil fuels.’

- ***Photo caption: Inchcape Fleet Solutions champion solar energy use through electric vehicle and solar panel project (left to right): Gary Woodcock, finance and business intelligence director, Inchcape Fleet Solutions and Steve Carter, sales manager, Ardenham.***

2012 to see a surge of online risk management activity

THE New Year looks set to be the year when the fleet sector sees significant growth in the use of online systems for assessing and training drivers, it is claimed.

According to Graham Hurdle, managing director of fleet risk management specialists E-Training World, market conditions all point towards next year being the time when uptake will accelerate.

‘Health and safety now sits near the top of many fleet managers’ to do list, and those that have delayed implementing any form of risk management policy are very unlikely to wait much longer before finding a solution,’ he said.

‘Yet, with heightened economic uncertainty on everyone’s minds, cost savings sit even higher on the fleet agenda, which means in 2012 we’ll see many companies determined to proceed with driver risk assessments and training, but at the lowest cost possible and with the purpose of saving money as a result.

‘For this reason, the popularity of online systems will surge because systems like ours offer fleets by far the most cost-effective solution as well as demonstrable benefits.’

As driver training companies, contract hire providers, insurers and fleet management specialists seek to add more value to their clients during challenging economic conditions, Hurdle also believes that demand for online solutions will also increase from the service companies within the fleet sector.

‘We work with many companies within the fleet market, offering them a tailored white labelled solution which they can offer to their customers,’ he explained.

‘Demand for this has been rising during 2011, however as businesses plan for the year ahead we are seeing quite a significant increase in the number of enquiries we are receiving from fleet sector suppliers for a branded system.’

Investment boosts company behind EV fleet scheduling system

THE company behind a fleet scheduling system for electric vehicles has secured £500,000 of investment from the Finance for Business North East Technology Fund, managed by IP Group, to help achieve its expansion plans.

Route Monkey has, over the past six years, developed the first scheduling system of its type for electric vehicles, which is initially being targeted at commercial vehicles and fleets.

The system helps fleet managers identify the best vehicle for every delivery or collection, helping to remove range anxiety and improve their return on investment.

As well as securing the investment from the Fund, Route Monkey has struck a strategic partnership with Smith Electric Vehicles, to supply its technology to one of the world’s biggest commercial electric vehicle manufacturers.

The global agreement will see RouteMonkey’s scheduling software interface with Smith Electric’s proprietary telematics system, Smith Link.

RouteMonkey’s real-time scheduling capabilities allow electric vehicle fleets to make opportune, additional collections and deliveries, without range anxiety or real-world interruptions affecting performance.

Route Monkey - which provides software solutions for vehicle operators, such as routing and back office solutions - is using the investment from the Fund to concentrate its focus on the electric vehicle market, and to open a new office in Newcastle in addition to its base in Scotland. It is also looking at expanding its software product portfolio, again with particular focus on the electric vehicle market.

As the business grows, it plans to recruit more software developers and add further sales resource to its team, creating new jobs in the region.

Longer-term, the business is looking to break into the United States and to establish a re-seller network in territories including South Africa and Ireland.

Route Monkey chief executive Colin Ferguson said his aspiration was for the business to be the ‘de facto scheduling provider in commercial electric vehicles’, and that the partnership with Tyne and Wear-based Smith Electric Vehicles was a second major boost for the business, following the investment.

He said: ‘With this support from IP Group we can take Route Monkey to another level. We are looking to export and expand into new areas internationally, and are able to look at doing that with a much more aggressive strategy than before.

Angela Strand, chief marketing officer and senior vice-president of business development at Smith Electric Vehicles, said: ‘Route Monkey will help our fleet customers maximise the range capabilities of their all-electric trucks and LCVs.

‘Fundamentally this is about electric vehicle asset management. Electric vehicles have a defined daily range capability. RouteMonkey helps fleets maximise the asset by utilising as much of that mileage as possible. The more miles the electric vehicles drives each day, the better the return on investment.’

Photo caption (left to right): Colin Ferguson, chief executive of Route Monkey, Geoff Allison, managing director of Smith Electric Vehicles Europe Ltd, and Ian Wilson, investment manager, IP Group.

Leasedrive signs four-year deal to use 1link Disposal Network

A FOUR-year deal to exclusively use epyx’s 1link Disposal Network e-commerce platform for all disposal activity has been signed by the Leasedrive Group.

The UK’s largest independent privately-owned vehicle management group operates more than 40,000 vehicles including the ex-Masterlease fleet, which has been operated, managed and integrated by Leasedrive since December 2010.

David Bird, managing director at the Leasedrive Group, said: ‘1link Disposal Network was used separately by Leasedrive and Velo prior to the merger of those two companies in 2007, and proved a highly successful disposal management tool after the two companies joined forces.

‘Signing a new four-year deal, which includes the ex-Masterlease fleet under the arrangement, makes perfect sense. We need a flexible and effective method of controlling our disposal activity for our combined fleets going forward and 1link Disposal Network provides this.’

Gary Gibson, head of customer services at epyx, added: ‘In addition to the existing Leasedrive disposals, the arrival of Masterlease on the platform adds about 15,000 vehicles annually to our volumes.

‘This is very good news for dealers who use 1link Disposal Network to acquire used vehicle stock, giving them access to large numbers of high quality used cars and vans at a point in time when supply remains very tight indeed.’

Fleet tyre policy turnaround delivers peace of mind

ATS Euromaster has won back a sole-supplier agreement with Scotland’s largest independent wine and spirit wholesaler, Wallaces Express, which operates 50 cars and 70 commercial vehicles.

It follows just six months after the account was passed to a local independent tyre dealer. The Irvine-based fleet initially changed suppliers in an effort to trim its fleet operating costs, but the new provider failed to meet its required service standards.

Frank Frew, transport manager at Wallaces Express, said: ‘The company took a view that we could reduce our tyre spend by buying tyres from a local dealer, but the quality of the service we received simply didn’t measure up. We demand high standards from all of our suppliers; it's not something we are prepared to compromise on.'

One of the critical issues picked up immediately by Frew and his team were missing re-torque labels.

'We had several instances of fitters changing tyres on our trucks, but not leaving re-torque notifications for the driver. This is a fundamental safety procedure - it should happen 100% of the time with any professional tyre service company.'

Frew and Wallaces Express fleet controller, Alan Fairlamb, got back in touch with ATS Euromaster and jointly developed a new tyre policy which would help deliver savings, matched with the same service standards to which the company was accustomed.

The new policy sees Kleber tyres being fitted to cars and vans, with trucks running on Primewell rubber - a new mid-range brand offered exclusively in the UK by ATS Euromaster.

The agreement also includes monthly tyre inspections, which help ensure maximum safety and reliability.

Frew added: 'Our revised policy gives me the peace of mind that our tyres are being serviced and maintained by skilled professionals. This not only protects our Operators' License, but helps ensure deliveries are made safely and on-time.'

Chevin Fleet Solutions unveils FleetWave2 software

FLEET management software provider Chevin Fleet Solutions marked the launch of its next generation flagship application, FleetWave, by inviting a host of customers and fleet industry experts to participate in a user group event.

Designed to showcase the software's enhanced capabilities and provide fleet professionals from across the globe with an opportunity to share knowledge and best practice, the user day also offered presentations and workshops tackling a variety of industry issues.

The launch event is the second annual gathering of Chevin's customers and part of the software provider's customer service drive.

Managing director Ashley Sowerby said: 'We pride ourselves on tailoring our products to fit individual business needs and then being on hand to provide support should it be required.

'[The] event gives us the opportunity to build stronger relationships with our customers, provide valuable insight into industry issues, offer an informal networking environment and showcase the major upgrade of the FleetWave fleet management system.'

In addition to enhanced speed and performance thanks to a move to .Net 4.0, FleetWave2 also offers improved functionality, including intuitive Key Performance Indicators and charting Wizards, which enable users to set their own KPIs and automatically produce charts and graphs to facilitate fleet data reporting.

Kate Franklin, fleet and support services team leader at Great Western Ambulance Service, said: 'FleetWave2 certainly seems like the strong and positive step forward I was hoping for. This user group has been really beneficial, not just in terms of better understanding the upgrades available to us, but by networking with fellow fleet professionals and discussing solutions to age-old fleet industry problems.'

Arqiva renews links with Leasedrive

ARQIVA, the communications infrastructure and media services company, has extended its vehicle rental agreement with the rental management division of the Leasedrive Group, the UK's largest independent privately-owned vehicle management group, for a further two years.

Roddy Graham, commercial director at Leasedrive said: 'Arqiva has a broadcast and mobile communications presence throughout the UK including the Isle of Man, the islands around Scotland and the Channel Islands so true nationwide coverage is of paramount importance. With its diverse vehicle requirements, we provide Arqiva with a dedicated reservations team to meet its specific needs.

'Given the nature of its business, besides renting different types of car, Arqiva has a requirement for specialist four-wheel-drive vehicles in order for its field engineers to access remote transmission masts, especially during the current digital switch-over. Although these rentals only account for 16% of its total spend, the availability of these specialist vehicles anywhere in the country for its immediate use is business critical.'

Fleets back Road Safety Week to young driver crashes

FLEET operators and suppliers nationwide are backing Road Safety Week, which concludes on Sunday (November 27).

Co-ordinated by charity Brake, thousands of organisations, schools and community groups around the UK are taking part in the Week to promote road safety.

The theme of Road Safety Week 2011 is 'Too young to die'. Brake, together with partners around the country, is drawing attention to the fact that road crashes are the biggest killer of young people, and appealing for action to prevent devastating crashes involving young drivers and passengers.

A survey of 8,110 young people by Brake and QBE Insurance, shows more than half of young people (56%) fear for their lives when a passenger with a young driver and the same proportion (56%) have been endangered by risk-taking peers speeding or drink driving (see below). The vast majority also support a tougher regime for novice drivers: 82% favour at least one type of licence restriction, such as a zero tolerance drink-drive limit.

Casualty statistics show that every 18 hours a young person is killed on UK roads, leaving behind devastated family and friends. Every hour-and-a-half, another young person suffers a serious injury on UK roads, in many cases life-changing injuries such as brain damage, paralysis or limb loss.

Young drivers are also involved in a disproportionately high number of crashes that kill and injure road users of all ages.

Julie Townsend, campaigns director at Brake, says: "It's fantastic to see so many fleet operators taking part in Road Safety Week, helping to get across life-saving messages to staff, customers and local communities. The commitment and involvement of the industry is so important to this flagship event, and those who get involved can benefit by using the Week as springboard for promoting road safety internally and getting more involved with the local community.'

Brake wants the Government to implement graduated driver licensing to help inexperienced drivers to be safer, in light of evidence that this would prevent thousands of needless deaths and injuries each year.

Among fleets that are involved in Road Safety Week are:

- Balfour Beatty Plant & Fleet Services, which is running a series of Beep Beep! Days in partnership with local primary schools. Beep Beep! Days raise awareness about road safety to pre-school children.

- British Telecommunications is reaffirming its commitment to community road safety by re-launching its Family and Friends Road Safety programme, now in its sixth year of operation.
- DHL Supply Chain and Bassetlaw District Council are holding two hard-hitting road safety awareness presentations.
- Suttons Transport is running road safety workshops for staff. The workshops focus on the devastation large vehicles can cause when driven badly. The company is promoting key messages, such as the need to drive within the speed limits, without alcohol, and with seatbelts buckled at all times.
- VIVA Beverages is raising awareness of the dangers of driving tired. Staff are attending garage forecourts across the UK, highlighting the alarming number of crashes that occur as a result of driver tiredness, and providing helpful tips and free resources to help drivers stay safe. The company and Brake are also using national Road Safety Week to launch a new fundraising project, called Wake Up For Work, which will run throughout 2012. The project will involve companies inviting staff to go to work in their pyjamas to raise awareness about the dangers of driving tired and raise vital funds for Brake.

ALD Automotive fleet size breaks through the 900,000 mark

ALD Automotive has reached a new milestone and manages a fleet of more than 900,000 vehicles around the world.

The landmark figure has been achieved, says the company, as a result of its strong commitment in customer service and satisfaction.

The subsidiary of the Societe Generale group says it has posted growth of more than 56,000 contracts this year, in line with an average yearly fleet growth of 9% over the last nine years.

With this result, ALD Automotive confirms its position as the second largest European and third largest global player in the Full service leasing and fleet management market. ALD Automotive also says it has the widest geographical coverage, with operations in 37 countries across four continents, expertise in the BRIC countries and a partnership with Wheels, Inc. in North America.

Model update

Lexus to launch new GS 250 in June 2012

LEXUS will expand its GS model range when the new 250 goes on sale in the UK in June next year, alongside the new GS 450h.

The new GS 250 was unveiled at the Guangzhou International Automobile Exhibition in China and is powered by a 2.5 litre V6 Dual VVT-i engine with D-4S direct port injection. The engine is mated to a six-speed ECT-i automatic transmission with sequential manual shift function and selectable drive modes

Maximum output from the 2.5 litre engine is 206 bhp at 6,400 rpm and peak torque of 253 Nm is delivered at 4,800 rpm, giving the car 0-62 mph acceleration in 8.6 seconds and a top speed of 142 mph. Combined cycle fuel consumption is 31.7 mpg and emissions are 207 g/km.

Compared to the current GS, the new model has a more spacious interior, with notably more head and legroom for rear seat passengers.

The car will be offered with a range of new technology features, including a 12.3-inch multimedia screen - the largest on the market. It will be available with a new S-flow air conditioning system with nanoe air purifying technology, and a new Mark Levinson audio system with up to 17 speakers.

Drivers can adjust vehicle behaviour to suit road conditions and driving preferences using the Drive Mode Select. This gives the option of Eco, Normal and Sport S modes, while versions equipped with Adaptive Variable Suspension offer a further Sport S+ mode for more dynamic performance.

New BMW M5 enters showrooms with power boost

THE fifth generation of the world's most successful performance saloon - the BMW M5 - is now available in the UK costing £73,040 on-the-road.

The car is powered by the most potent engine ever devised by BMW's high-performance M division - a 4.4 litre 560 bhp powerplant - which makes its world debut in the model, along with race-bred chassis technology that includes, for the first time, an Active M differential and electronic damping control.

For the first time an M5 features a turbocharged power unit, which develops 680Nm of torque from 1,500rpm.

Compared with the previous V10-engined M5, maximum power is up by around 10% and peak torque by more than 30%. As a result, the latest M5 can accelerate from 0-62 mph in 4.4 seconds. The voluntarily limited top speed is 155 mph.

With BMW's seven-speed M Double Clutch Transmission Drivelogic and Efficient Dynamics technology, including engine Auto Start-Stop and Brake Energy Regeneration, the M5's fuel consumption has been improved by more than 30% to 28.5 mpg, while emissions tumble to 232 g/km.

The interior of the M5 is claimed to fuse the intimacy of a sports-car cockpit, the spaciousness of a prestige saloon and the luxury of a premium car.

It features bespoke M Sports seats, Merino leather upholstery, Aluminium Trace interior trim strips and the BMW Individual roof liner in Anthracite, plus the BMW iDrive control system with a 10.2-inch Control Display. M5 lettering on the sill panels is standard.

Standard equipment includes: Head-up display, DAB digital radio, front and rear Park Distance Control, four-zone air-conditioning, xenon headlights, adaptive headlights, front seat heating, Professional Multimedia Navigation system, BMW Assist, Bluetooth and USB audio interface.

In its first full year BMW UK expects to sell about 550 M5 saloons.

Five-door Sportback joins Audi A1 range

THE new five-door Sportback version of Audi's A1 premium subcompact hatchback is available to order with first deliveries scheduled for spring 2012.

On-the-road prices for the range start at £13,980 for the 1.2TFSI SE manual and top out at £21,270 for the 1.4TFSI S line S tronic - a £560 premium model-for-model over the three-door variant.

Four TFSI and TDI engines will be initially available in the UK - 1.2 TFSI petrol (86 PS, 160 Nm), 1.4 TFSI petrol (122 PS, 200 Nm), 1.4 TFSI twin-charge petrol (185 PS, 250 Nm) and 1.6 TDI diesel (105 PS, 250 Nm).

A 2.0 TDI will follow in summer 2012 (143 PS, 320 Nm). Just introduced into the three-door line-up, it will power the A1 Sportback 2.0 TDI to 62 mph in 8.5 seconds, and has the potential for 68.9 mpg according to the combined cycle test. The 1.6 TDI champions efficiency across the range with 74.3 mpg and emissions of 99 g/km.

Standard features across the range include alloy wheels, split/folding rear seat, front and rear electric windows, air conditioning, single CD audio system with MP3 compatibility and ESP with latest differential lock system.

Although its dimensions very closely follow those of the three-door, the A1 Sportback is six millimetres taller and six millimetres wider, and inside offers slightly more head room and shoulder room as a result.

The luggage compartment capacity is on a par with the three-door A1 at 270 litres with the backrests of the standard split/folding rear seat in place or 920 litres with the seat folded.

The performance flagship - the turbocharged and supercharged 1.4 TFSI 185 PS - will feature the seven-speed S tronic twin-clutch gearbox with its rapid shifts as standard, helping it to sprint to 62 mph from rest in seven seconds on the way to a top speed of 141 mph.

Volkswagen unveils Passat 4x4

VOLKSWAGEN has released the first images of the new Passat Alltrack, which is making its world debut at the Tokyo Motor Show next week, ahead of its introduction to the market in early 2012.

Based on the Passat Estate, the Passat Alltrack adds 4MOTION four-wheel drive and a raised ride height that give it greater agility off-road, along with body enhancements that also provide some protection from scrapes when covering rough terrain. These include stainless steel-look front and rear underbody protection panels and flared side sills. Other features include matt chrome roof rails, window surrounds, grille and exterior mirror casings.

At 4,771 mm, the Passat Alltrack is exactly the same length as the Passat Estate, and despite flared wheel arch protection the vehicle's width also remains the same at 1,820 mm.

The suspension is raised to increase ground clearance from 135 to 165 mm, which also improves the ramp breakaway angle - significant when crossing the crest of a hill - from 9.5 to 12.8 degrees.

The Passat Alltrack also features an off-road mode, similar to that on the Tiguan Escape. When switched on via a dashboard-mounted button, this activates hill descent assist, which automatically brakes the vehicle when the descent angle is greater than 10 degrees.

In the UK, the Passat Alltrack will be available as a 2.0 litre TDI 140 PS with six-speed manual gearbox or a 2.0 litre TDI 170 PS with six-speed DSG transmission.

Standard equipment will include Alcantara upholstery, 2Zone electronic climate control, cruise control, tyre pressure monitoring system, MDI iPod connectivity, Bluetooth telephone preparation and 18-inch alloys.

Volkswagen's UK dealers are expected to start taking orders for the new car in April, with first deliveries scheduled for July. More details including pricing will be available nearer the launch date.

Debut for Porsche Carrera Cabriolet

THE new convertible edition of the 911 Carrera will go on sale on March 3, 2012 priced from £79,947 with the S trim model priced from £89,740.

Powered by either a 350 bhp 3.4 litre engine or 400 bhp 3.8 litre engine, the Cabriolet shares its new, high tech aluminium-steel body with the Coupe, and the convertible extends this innovation to its all-new, unique hood.

When raised, the design of the hood ensures the 911 roof line is retained in its entirety. Intelligent light-weight design, including the use of magnesium in the hood frame, ensures reduced weight for increased responsiveness, lower fuel consumption and greater comfort.

As is the case with the Coupe model, the new 911 Cabriolet is significantly lighter overall than its predecessor.

Combined with lower weight, the new 911 Cabriolet models share the longer wheelbase, wider front track and the new electro-mechanical power steering of their Coupe siblings.

Both engines are coupled to a seven-speed manual transmission as standard and return more than 28 mpg on the combined fuel cycle.

Euro NCAP: Chinese manufacturers invest in safety

THE lower medium sector MG6, which is on sale in the UK, achieved a four-star safety rating in the latest European New Car Assessment crash tests.

Euro NCAP, which also tested the Geely Emgrand EC7 which also achieved a four-star rating but is not on UK sale, described the results as ‘creditable’ and said they underlined the manufacturers’ desire to improve the safety record of Chinese brands in Europe.

Michiel van Ratingen, Euro NCAP secretary general, said: ‘These results mark a milestone for the Chinese automotive industry. It is a clear sign that Chinese car makers are building on recent experiences and rapidly investing in better vehicle safety. Even with the upcoming increased demands, five stars are expected to be within reach soon.’

Perhaps surprisingly, said Euro NCAP, the electric Renault Fluence ZE fell short of the anticipated top five stars, underachieving on pedestrian protection, and driver and passenger protection. The result puts it on a par with the Mitsubishi i-MiEV, but behind other electric vehicles such as the Nissan Leaf and Vauxhall/Opel Ampera tested earlier in the year.

In the latest batch of crash test results, the Fiat Panda (four star) lost a star as it is not fitted with electronic stability control as standard, despite the technology becoming mandatory in 2012. By contrast, Volkswagen ensured very high standard availability of ESC on the Up!, securing a five-star rating for that car and its cousins, the SEAT Mii and the Skoda Citigo.

The Jeep Grand Cherokee (four star) showed disappointing results in child occupant protection, said Euro NCAP. In the frontal impact, the seat rail holding the seat belt anchorage came close to breaking in two, resulting in contact, through the fabric of the airbag, of the driver’s head with the steering wheel rim.

As a result, Euro NCAP has urged Jeep to complete its investigation into the cause and implement an improved seat rail design in future production cars soon.

The Jaguar XF also achieved a four-star rating, while the top mark of five stars was given to the Chevrolet Malibu, Kia Rio, Mercedes-Benz B-Class and C-Class Coupe, the Range Rover Evoque, Subaru XV and Volkswagen Beetle.

The Beetle and XV achieved ‘impressive results’ in child occupant protection, said Euro NCAP, with both reaching 90%, which is the maximum score the organisation has yet given for the assessment.

It was also the first time Euro NCAP has rewarded a fully automatic passenger airbag activation system, where the front passenger of the XV is only activated when an occupant of a suitable size is detected in the seat, effectively minimising the risk for younger children seated in that position.

As part of Euro NCAP Advanced's mission to reward advanced systems, the safety organization has assessed a number of new technologies offered on recently tested models.

Rewards are given to safety innovations for which the car maker has demonstrated significant safety benefits for consumers. Ford is rewarded for its Driver Alert and Forward Alert systems on the Focus, making the car the first that offers four rewarded technologies. Mercedes-Benz is rewarded for Attention Assist and Collision Prevention Assist;, Opel for Adaptive Forward Lighting; and Volkswagen for City Emergency Brake.

Van Ratingen said: 'We are particularly pleased to see Collision Prevention Assist being fitted as standard equipment to the new B-Class, the first time for a car in this segment to have such equipment so broadly fitted. It demonstrates the carmaker's confidence in the ability of brake support technology, an opinion supported by Euro NCAP.'

Manufacturer news

Saab's future on a knife edge as sale negotiations continue

SAAB'S future remains on a knife edge as the parent company of the ailing Swedish manufacturer continues to hope that proposals to save the company are accepted.

Last month, Swedish Automobile N.V. (SWAN), the holding company that owns both Saab and sister manufacturer Spyker, signed a memorandum of understanding to sell Saab Automobile and Saab GB to Chinese motor manufacturers Pang Da Automobile Trade Company Ltd and Zhejiang Youngman Lotus Automobile Co., Ltd in a €100 million deal.

Conditional agreement has also been reached on the sale of Spyker to US private equity company North Street Capital, LP for €32m

However, earlier this month, General Motors, which previously owned Saab, said that it could not agree to the continuation of the existing technology licenses or the continued supply of 9-4X vehicles to Saab Automobile following the proposed change in ownership of the Saab Auto Group.

SWAN and Saab Automobile are currently in discussion with General Motors. However, in a trading update SWAN said that without General Motors' consent having first been obtained, it is uncertain whether the parties were in the position to sign a final deal.

The future of SWAN depends on the outcome of the negotiations with the purchasers of the Saab Auto Group (Pang Da and Youngman) and the Spyker business (North Street).

The trading statement said: 'If SWAN is not able to complete a sale of the Saab Auto Group or secure further financing for the Saab Auto Group, management will likely not be able to safeguard the continuity of the Saab Auto Group, which will have negative financial implications for Swan and its stakeholders and may result in the bankruptcy of the Saab Auto Group.

'If SWAN is not able to complete a sale of the Spyker business, SWAN may continue the Spyker business, provided that the necessary funding for that business can be obtained.

'If SWAN was to sell the Saab Auto Group but continues the activities of the Spyker business, as it did before it acquired the Saab Auto Group at the beginning of 2010, it will focus exclusively on the Spyker business.

'If both businesses are sold, SWAN will consider all of its options, including a voluntary liquidation of SWAN.

‘The fact that the required approvals are not yet secured and that there are currently not yet final binding agreements in place with the purchasers of the Saab Auto Group and the Spyker business leads to uncertainty with respect to the completion of the various transactions described above and thus the future of SWAN and any settlement with stakeholders.’

The statement added: ‘Both sales and production in the third quarter continued to be seriously hampered by the production stoppages and tight liquidity situation at Saab Automobile.

‘The lack of new cars coming into markets because of the stop in production continued to cause a very challenging business environment for all Saab sales points around the globe, while stock levels around the globe continued to fall as a result of the production stop.’

Private motorists follow company car leasing lead

PRIVATE motorists are following the lead of company car drivers and opting for flexible rental packages in increasing numbers reflecting a possible shift in attitudes to motor funding, according to Volvo.

The record number of contracts secured by Volvo dealerships across the UK reflects a growing trend in the automotive retail sector whereby motorists are turning their backs on outright car ownership and instead are choosing personal contract hire schemes.

Whilst business contract hire still formed the majority of the leasing business in October, personal contract hire made up 28% of the total - up by two thirds (66%) compared to October 2010. Leasing business as a whole was up by 68% in October compared to the same time last year.

The rise in motorists opting for contract hire is a reflection of consumers watching every penny in the current climate and the attraction of a fixed monthly cost as well as an attitude change, according to Tony Grice, Volvo UK’s training and field manager.

He said: ‘A competitive rental figure that incorporates a maintenance package means we have a practically unbeatable value-for-money proposition. We’re now seeing more customers opting for contract hire products than ever before.

‘We are seeing a mentality similar to that of paying a monthly rental for a phone and upgrading on a one-two year basis, filtering into other purchasing areas including motoring. As such, increasing numbers of people are opting for a fixed monthly payment which enables them to upgrade their vehicle every two or three years.

‘This funding method is particularly attractive in the current climate because it makes budgeting easy.’

The Volvo V60, S60 and XC60 proved to be the most popular vehicles leased in October this year with the V60 D3 R Design being the out and out favourite.

Jaguar Land Rover wins motor industry innovation award

JAGUAR Land Rover’s technology concept for a plug-in hybrid diesel electric powertrain - Range_e, - has won the 2011 Award for Automotive Innovation from the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT).

The system, first revealed at the Geneva Motor Show in March, has been hailed by the auto industry as the most significant achievement of the year in UK research and development for the global market.

Range_e marks a world first as a luxury all-wheel drive vehicle powered by plug-in hybrid system, bringing together a 69kW electric motor and 14.2kWh lithium-ion battery with Land Rover’s 245 PS 3.0 litre TDV6 diesel engine.

The vehicle, based on the Range Rover Sport, can be driven for more than 20 miles on its electric power, creating zero tailpipe emissions. Beyond this range the diesel hybrid drivetrain engages and continues to optimise carbon dioxide emissions.

Overall emissions output is 89 g/km with 85 mpg fuel economy, while the system's combined power of 339 PS delivers a top speed of around 120 mph.

The award, sponsored by GKN, was presented to Jaguar Land Rover by Transport Minister Norman Baker and Rob Rickell, GKN global engineering director, at this week's SMMT annual dinner.

Peter Richings, Jaguar Land Rover chief engineer for hybrids, said: 'Range_e demonstrates the advances we are making in cleaner and more fuel efficient performance without compromising the performance and all-wheel drive capabilities that are at the heart of our brand and we look forward to bringing its benefits to the market in the near future.

Land Rover plans to introduce its first diesel electric hybrid model in 2013.

SsangYong on the comeback trail in the UK

KOREAN marque SsangYong is ready to roll again in the UK with new vehicles and a new confidence.

Since the Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s SsangYong has gone through a succession of owners - Daewoo, China's SAIC and now India's Mahindra & Mahindra, which rescued the company from Chapter 11 bankruptcy last year.

All of which has led to considerable uncertainty in the UK, but with the new Giugiaro-styled Korando crossover coming into the dealerships, further confidence comes with new a distributor, Gibraltar based Bassadone Automotive Group.

Still at the helm of the UK operations is managing director Paul Williams. He told *Headlineauto*: 'Bassadone has been involved since the summer and the Group has a lot of experience in vehicle distribution in Europe and Africa with a number of brands.

'For the first time we have some secure financial backing and I can plan with confidence for the future.'

The new Korando enters the fastest-growing segment in the UK, the C-crossover, alongside Korean rivals such as the Kia Sportage and Hyundai ix35, as well as rivals such as the UK-built Nissan Qashqai.

In the SssangYong showrooms it joins the Rexton SUV and Rodius MPV, both of which will get new Euro 5 emission engines next year. Also in the pipeline are a new pick-up, due next spring, and a B-segment crossover in 2013.

Suzuki seeks mediation to end alliance with Volkswagen

JAPANESE motor manufacturer Suzuki says it will seek arbitration if German carmaker Volkswagen does not sell its stake in the company.

Suzuki has declared the alliance dead and says it wants Volkswagen to either sell its 20% stake in the business, which it bought in 2009, back to it or to an approved third party. However, Volkswagen says Suzuki has 'no legal foundation' to force it to sell its shares.

Suzuki declined to provide details on how the arbitration would work saying the process was confidential.

In a statement, Suzuki said that Volkswagen did not allow it access to core technology and it also became clear that there were differences between Suzuki and Volkswagen in the understanding of 'independence'.

Light commercial vehicles

Investment by UK businesses in commercial vehicles accelerates

FUNDING for UK businesses to invest in commercial vehicle fleets has increased by 24% in the last 12 months says, LPM Outsourcing, which provides services to the asset finance market.

Asset backed funding for commercial vehicles jumped to £4.2 billion for the 12 months to the end of September up from £3.4bn in the previous 12 months.

The increase in investment in commercial vehicles is growing at a far faster rate than the 8% rise in asset based lending for all business investment over the same period.

LPM Outsourcing says growth in funding is being driven by captives - finance companies run by vehicle manufacturers to help customers fund vehicles.

Ian Dennis, of LPM Outsourcing, says manufacturer owned captives are stepping into the breach left by the retrenchment of some of the mainstream banks.

He said: ‘Some of the banks are turning down more of the applications to fund investments by businesses in their commercial vehicles. That means manufacturers can’t sell their product and businesses can’t get the new more efficient vehicles that they need.

‘The solution is for the manufacturers’ captives to shoulder more of the financing burden, to write more business and fill the hole left by the withdrawal of lending from some banks.

‘We are seeing a definite rise in the levels of business that we handle for captives and we have a number of enquiries from manufacturers that are considering setting up a captive for the first time.

‘Captives are taking on those deals that banks have now decided are too risky and they are taking on smaller deals that they would not normally have picked up.’

LPM Outsourcing also says that the increase in finance is driven by those UK businesses that have decided that they can no longer delay investment in the trucks and vans that are the public face of many organisations.

‘Businesses might try to keep running machinery past its best but if your customers associate your company with old and tired vans or trucks then that is going to lose you sales. By adapting the business model, captives are able to ramp up market presence and increase market share, thereby maintaining profit margins in a market where the whole industry is in a state of flux,’ said Dennis.

Businesses are also investing in new more fuel efficient vehicles that will cut their running costs and meet the more stringent new Euro5 and Euro6 emission standards required for commercial vehicles.

Residual value update

Fleet operators advised to carefully spec vehicles to maximise RVs

A SALE at Shoreham Vehicle Auctions reinforced the importance of speccing a vehicle correctly from the outset to maximise future residual values.

Shoreham Vehicle Auctions disposed of seven Volkwagen Transporter 102 TDi SWB vans on behalf of Dorset-based rental company U-Drive that were all 13 months old on a 60-plate with between 13,100 and 28,100 miles on the clock.

All seven vans beat CAP Red Book residual values with two making 113.5% of book, equivalent to an extra £1,400 on the price tag, because the owner focussed on the future buyer's needs when it specced the vehicles from new.

All vehicles were finished with metallic paint, reversing sensors, air conditioning and the Volkswagen Appearance Pack that includes body-coloured bumpers (from the Caravelle people carrier or Sportline models), plus electrically adjustable, folding and heated body-coloured door mirrors, and electric front windows.

'The late-low mileage used market can fluctuate based on what is happening with the new vehicle market, that is unless you do your homework and spec up the vans with the next owner's needs in mind,' said Alex Wright, managing director of Shoreham Vehicle Auctions.

'Whether selling cars or vans you are then more in control of your own destiny and vendors like U-Drive deserve to maximise their residual values because they know their future buyer base.'

All seven vans were bought by main dealers, specialist independent Transporter retailers and camper converters.

Mark Hamblin, fleet sales and purchasing manager of U-Drive, said: 'The majority of our vans we keep for three years, but these tend to be white Transits with a more basic specification. Because of the strong following of the Transporter in the used market there is a huge demand for 12-month-old vehicles.

'Despite them costing more to buy and spec, the strong residual value means they cost no more to run or to hire. We run 75 Transporters at any one time across our 16 sites. We have another 30 11-plate Transporters coming up for sale in March 2012 and we anticipate a strong demand from the trade.

'We have to be very mindful that the vans we buy are workhorses and they could be hired and driven by up to 100 separate people over a 12 month period. But ultimately we must safeguard the value of our fleet - get the spec right like we aim to do and you can generate a strong return on your original investment, get it wrong and you could end up losing £1,000 on every vehicle you sell. On a fleet of a few hundred vehicles that could bankrupt you.'

Politics and regulation

Ban under-25s from night-time driving say insurers

INSURERS have called on the Government to ban drivers under the age of 25 from the UK's roads at night - although an exemption would apply in the case of work - and apply a zero drink-drive limit to them in a bid to cut young driver road accidents and reduce their insurance costs.

One in four people killed or seriously injured in a road crash is a young driver or one of their passengers, yet drivers under age 25 account for only 12% of all driving license holders.

Every day two people die and 16 people are injured in road crashes involving drivers under 25 - the section of the population most at risk on the roads and ahead of at-work drivers. Young male drivers are especially at risk, being five times more likely to be involved in a crash than 30-59 year old males.

Young drivers aged under 25 are twice as likely to fail a breathalyser test and more at risk when driving late at night and early in the morning.

‘Our proposals are not designed to drive young drivers off the road, but to ensure that they become safer drivers. We must act to reduce the tragic loss of young lives on our roads’, said Nick Starling, the ABI’s director of general insurance and health.

The ABI wants to see for learner drivers aged under 25:

- A minimum one-year learning period before taking the driving test. A minimum learning period applies in many other countries.
- A ban on taking intensive driving courses where this is the sole means of learning to pass the driving test. That would enable learner drivers to gain experience in a wider variety of road conditions.

For newly-qualified drivers aged under 25 the ABI wants:

- All new drivers should hold a graduated driving licence for two years, at the end of which they should be required to pass a second test to ensure that they are safe to drive on all types of roads.
- The graduated driving licence would contain restrictions on the number of passengers that could be carried. This reflects the significantly increased accident risk when other passengers are in the car. It would also include restrictions on driving between 11pm-4am, albeit with certain exemptions, such as where driving is necessary due to work.

Starling added: ‘While recent years may have seen a reduction road accident fatalities and serious injuries the figures are still too high. Every young driver statistic is a tragedy. Whether it is inexperience, youthful bravado or sheer recklessness we need tough action to better equip young drivers to handle the dangers of driving.

‘Young drivers pay more for their motor insurance because their accident risk is not only high, but because accidents that they are involved often involve very costly claims for personal injuries. So helping them to be safer drivers and reducing their accident rates will mean they will pay less for their motor insurance in the long run.’

Congestion to soar as road investment fails to match car use

THERE will be at least four million more cars on the UK’s roads in the next 25 years as the population grows by more than ten million.

The increase in car use will be accompanied by surges in traffic volume and delays on the UK’s roads, which are already the most heavily used in Europe, it is claimed.

Yet in the face of this scenario the Government has significantly reduced road transport investment because of the recession and ministers have not explained what plans they have to cope with the bleak picture painted by their own numbers.

The depressing future is outlined in a new RAC Foundation report *‘Keeping the Nation Moving’*. Professor Stephen Glaister, director of the RAC Foundation, said: ‘Forget about Plan B, ministers do not even have a Plan A for dealing with the awful conditions forecast for the roads in the years ahead. It is a case of jams today, and even more jams tomorrow.’

As Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne prepares to set out how the Government plans to lift the British economy in his Autumn Statement on Tuesday (November 29), toll lanes are being suggested as one answer.

Firms, it was suggested in the *Daily Mail* (Monday, November 21), would be asked to construct dedicated ‘express lanes’ alongside busy sections of motorways and trunk roads.

Drivers using the lanes would be billed per journey, with the profits going to the private sector.

It is claimed that the initiative is being 'actively considered' as part of the Government's growth review. Roads suggested to be under consideration for toll lanes include the A14 links the port of Felixstowe to the Midlands.

Official figures predict:

- The population will rise by more than 10 million by 2035
- Based on the current rate of car ownership, there will be four million more cars on the road - and this doesn't take account of the continued growth of car ownership amongst the poorer and older sections of society
- Traffic volume will rise by 43% by 2035
- Average delays will rise by 54% over the same period - on already congested roads the jams will be much greater

Glaister said: 'The Department for Transport's own figures show that by 2035 traffic is set to rise by almost 50% and delays by more than 50%. And these are only average figures. In some places, at some times of the day, the jams will be many times worse. The impact will be immense, not just on car drivers but also businesses trying to move their goods about.

'There needs to be a fundamental look at how the strategic and main roads are planned, developed, funded, operated and maintained; how the traffic that uses the road network is managed; and how that use is paid for.

'In the meantime there are scores of relatively small scale road improvement schemes which could be implemented as part of the growth agenda. They would deliver big benefits to significant numbers of people and businesses.

'We are not advocating a massive road building programme - we know we cannot build our way out of the nation's forecast traffic problems, nor would we want to afford to. But what we do need from Government is a clear long-term strategy. The Government's own forecasts just cannot be ignored.'

The RAC Foundation - together with consultancy group Arup - has identified 96 unfunded road schemes that are currently sitting on the Department for Transport's shelves.

Together these would deliver significant returns, with the top 10 projects all offering benefits of more than £6 for every pound invested, says the RAC Foundation.

Glaister continued: 'The Government talks about promoting growth, so why doesn't it dust down its own files and make best use of taxpayers' money by spending it on the 96 road schemes it has already judged to deliver fantastic returns?'

General motor industry news

Diesel fuel prices rise but there's respite for petrol drivers

DIESEL pump prices have risen in the last month while the price of unleaded petrol has fallen, according to the latest AA fuel price report.

Average diesel pump prices have increased by about 1p a litre which, with the average cost of a litre of unleaded dropping slightly, has opened up a price gap between the two fuels that has never been bigger except during the extraordinary price spikes of 2008.

The average price of petrol has fallen 0.81p a litre, from 134.51p in mid-October to 133.7p now. Diesel, the mainstay for business, has risen on average 1.3p a litre, from 139.65p a month ago to 140.95p now.

The 7.25p price difference between the two fuels, although dwarfed by the 15.3p gap in late November 2008, bodes badly for owners - and fleets - who traded in their petrol cars for diesels.

Many switched in the hope that greater fuel efficiency would recoup the extra cost of buying the vehicle (£1,500-£2,000 for a small car, £500-£1,000 for a large car) before saving significantly on subsequent fuel costs.

The break-even point is now stretching further away as the price gap grows and will be harder to meet with the trend being for businesses and private motorists to clock up lower annual mileages.

That petrol-diesel gap varies regionally with the biggest being in Scotland at 8.2p a litre and the smallest in London at 6.1p, although there is often a greater variety of diesel prices among local fuel stations than with petrol.

Although the average price of petrol has fallen over the past month, it has yet to reflect the full drop in the NW Europe wholesale cost, from around 50p a litre in early September to around 45p now. Average UK petrol prices started to fall away from a high of around 136p a litre in late September and continue to creep down, although faster at some petrol stations than others.

The AA reports that some independent retailers have been undercutting supermarkets in neighbouring towns by as much as 3p a litre this month and localised price-matching has created a price difference between towns of as much as 5p a litre.

AA president Edmund King said: ‘The fall in the price of oil due to the eurozone crisis had brought some hope of respite for drivers but the opposite has happened for diesel car owners. The petrol price may have been falling overall, but it’s dropped faster for some than others, and that adds to the frustration.’

Poor marketing stalls electric car take-up, says new report

ELECTRIC cars have failed to generate sales among British motorists because of confusion about the realities of their cost and performance, according to new research.

The GfK Automotive study of more than 3,000 British motorists finds that the lack of understanding about the practicalities of electric cars is deepest amongst those who say they are keenest to purchase one.

While 8% of motorists plan to buy an electric car, the vast majority of this group underestimate the cost and time it takes to charge the vehicles and overestimate their range.

This clash between perception and reality helps to explain why the public’s interest in the vehicles has not translated into sales.

The most recent Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders’ data shows that just 1,021 electric cars have been sold to date in 2011 with around 70% of cars reported to have been sold to ‘business buyers’..

GfK’s new study suggests that the number of drivers who would consider buying an electric car and have a realistic idea of the costs and performance of the vehicles is just 1% of UK drivers.

The new findings reveal that drivers intending to buy electric cars significantly underestimate the cost of purchase. While electric models tend to retail for around £10,000 more than petrol engine equivalents, 3 44% of those intending to buy electric think they cost the same or less than traditional cars, with only 41% believing they cost more.

Francisco Lopez, managing director of GfK Automotive, said: ‘For all investment the Government and manufacturers have made in promoting electric cars, it is clear the public remain largely confused and to a certain extent uninformed about the specifics.

'If they are serious about transforming Britons into an electric motoring nation, one of the first things to do is to ensure consumers are clear of their genuine benefits. Only when consumers have a good understanding of the practicalities of owning an electric car can they realistically be expected to start purchasing them.'

The study shows that as well as confusion over cost, there was also a lack of knowledge about the charging time and range of vehicles. 60% of those most interested in purchasing electric cars think they should only have to charge the vehicle for a maximum of two hours whereas the actual average figure is closer to six hours - a time only 3% were willing to accept.

Similarly, the keenest potential purchasers also over-estimate the distance electric cars can travel between recharging, with over half (52%) expecting the minimum driving range to be over 200 miles. In reality, the range is only about half of that.

These figures contrast sharply with drivers with no interest in buying an electric car, three-quarters of whom would refuse to purchase because of limited battery range. Additionally, almost two-thirds (63%) are concerned about the high purchase cost and 59% have fears about battery charging times.

Lopez said: 'It is telling that those who are enthusiastic about electric cars are generally unaware of the realities of owning one. There is a real struggle ahead for brands to make claims about electric cars credible to a largely sceptical public.

'Manufacturers need to both counteract negative sentiment from the naysayers and to encourage those who are positive about electric cars into purchasing vehicles and advocating their purchase.'

He says there are two solutions for manufacturers. The first is to introduce electric cars at a lower entrance cost as Renault/PSA are planning with a model costing about £15,000 plus a monthly fee for batteries, which, he suggests, would potentially triple the number of people likely to go electric.

The other solution - which is already happening with the Toyota Prius Plug-in and the upcoming Vauxhall Ampera - is that people dip their toes in the water with vehicles which allow an extended range.

Lopez concluded: 'Communicating these solutions with the car-buying public is now the key challenge to manufacturers, dealers and marketers.'

Motoring costs accelerate 14% in a year, says RAC

IT now costs Brits over £6,600 per year to keep a car on the road following a 14% (£819) in the average annual cost of owning and running a vehicle in the past 12 months, according to the RAC's annual Cost of Motoring Index.

The increase is almost three times the current inflation rate of 5.0% and represents yet another blow to Britain's cash strapped motorists.

The latest annual figures mean drivers now have to pay on average £128.64 per week, or 55.74p per mile to own and run their vehicles. What's more, it now costs an average of £1,556 per year more to own and run a car than it did in 2007, before the financial crisis and subsequent recession, says the motoring organisation.

The Cost of Motoring Index, which is based on a pool of 17 new cars weighted by their ownership, is calculated by taking into consideration all the various financial outgoings associated with owning a new car. These include: depreciation, finance, service, maintenance, repair, fuel, insurance, road tax and breakdown cover.

When depreciation and finance are excluded, day-to-day running costs are also up a staggering 11% per year to £2,741.

Yet again, the largest single increase in running costs is fuel which has increased by £160 since 2010 - a 12.4% increase in just one year.

Insurance costs have also risen sharply, rising 14.4% to an average of £551. This increase has been driven by rising costs for insurers from personal injury claims and associated legal costs, insurance fraud and uninsured drivers involved in accidents. The cost of insurance is now 35% higher on average than in 2009.

Adrian Tink, RAC motoring strategist, said: ‘This year’s Cost of Motoring Index highlights the tough conditions being faced by Britain’s motorists. With the annual cost of motoring approaching £7,000 the price burden of car ownership is hitting drivers hard. The increase of almost three times the rate of inflation is crippling drivers’ wallets and something needs to be done to stem the tide.

‘With fuel prices continuing to be the biggest single running cost, UK drivers want action from the Government.’

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