

UK streets ahead in Europe with motorway roadworks

Motorway roadworks in the UK are recognised as the best in Europe, according to this year's survey of how well major highway repairs are organised in 10 countries across the Continent.

Independent inspections, conducted with sophisticated vehicle-mounted surveillance technology on behalf of The AA Motoring Trust, found that daytime roadworks on the M42 near Birmingham stood out as the best among 53 sites looked at by the Eurotest consortium this summer.

Five sets of motorway roadworks along stretches of the M42 near Birmingham, M1 near Hemel Hempstead, M25 near Cheshunt, M5 near Clevedon and the M5 near Taunton were inspected. All except the Taunton site were inspected again at night to reflect the uniquely British practice of changing layouts for more intensive work during the hours of the dark.

The M42s daytime roadworks layout received almost 100 per cent from the surveys inspectors who described it as outstanding. They were impressed by the clearly visible signs and the wide traffic lanes that were well marked and in good condition.

However, the experts were more critical of the night-time operation, in particular inadequate warning of lane closures ahead. In addition, they were often less happy with sites where there were no solid barriers separating work areas from traffic and, as routing* accounts for 40 per cent of marks, the M42s night-time roadworks site was the worst in the UK.

Work on the M1 near Hemel Hempstead was more consistently very good both in the day and at night. In the dark, the inspectors were more impressed with the protection for roadworkers and advanced information leading to the site.

Overall, UK motorway roadworks are praised for the 24-hour free tow-away service, permanent speed cameras that are well signed to influence driver behaviour, and all were given top marks for the condition and marking of traffic lanes.

Criticism focused on the level of information given to drivers both on the approach to and through the roadworks. The extent to which drivers were told the type of and reason for roadworks, length and duration, and progress indicators through the site led to two of the nine sites being rated very poor in this category. However, information accounts for only five per cent of the marks. Inspectors were also less happy with the number of exit/entry points used by works vehicles.

Flashing directional lights that guide drivers into changed lanes, particularly at night, are a European practice favoured by the inspectors. Eye-catching roadside information to persuade drivers to slow down and inform them of progress through a contraflow system, such as the Austrian sad-to-smiley faces signs, are also recommended as possible improvements for UK motorway roadworks.

On the basis of four UK motorway roadworks sites being rated very good, including the near-perfect M42 daytime site, expert European road engineers appointed by the Eurotest consortium judged the UK to be best, says Paul Watters, head of roads and transport policy for The AA Motoring Trust.

There is still clearly room for improvements to UK motorway roadworks that wouldnt cause that much of an upheaval in current practices. In particular, better information leading to and through sites could help to improve driver attitude to roadworks and safety.

Watters adds: High-profile speed enforcement at most UK motorway roadworks sites undoubtedly improves behaviour and thus safety. However, the AA Trust is calling for these speed limits to be varied when the risk is less, such as raising the limit when there is no work going on.

Other Europeans understand more clearly and can see the major benefits of the UKs night-time working practices. However, we havent cornered the market on innovation: directional beacons and better information systems are practices that the AA Trust would like the UK to adopt soon.

Ginny Clarke, Chief Highway Engineer for the Highways Agency says: "We are delighted with the recognition in this important study of Britain's commitment to road safety for drivers and road workers and the high quality of the work, often at night, to keep motorways open for use during the busiest times. We continue to look for innovative ways of reducing delays to drivers while essential work on the country's strategic roads takes place."

Across Europe, the standard of roadworks has improved considerably compared to last year. Although the number of sites rated poor fell from six in 2005 to five this year, there were only seven sites that were merely acceptable compared to half of the sample last year. The number of sites rated very good soared from one in 2005 to 14 in 2006.

Roadworks sites in southern Europe were amongst the worst, with two out of five Italian sites rated poor and one of the two

Croatian sites below par. However, the way roadworks are carried out in Spain was much improved on last year and Portugal, taking part for the first time, scored well.

NOTES TO EDITORS: A total of 53 motorway roadwork zones were inspected in 10 European countries: 10 in Germany, nine in Great Britain, eight in Austria, five in Italy and the Netherlands, four in France, Spain and Switzerland, and two in Croatia and Portugal. All of the sites tested were long-term works on main European travel routes. The shortest site inspected was one kilometre, the longest 22 kilometres.

ADAC (the German AA), which oversaw the project, commissioned the Transport Infrastructure Institute at the Faculty of Transport and Traffic Science at Dresden University of Technology to perform the tests. The inspections were carried out between April and July 2006 and were undertaken in both directions, twice during the day and once at night. A BMW 525d Touring fitted with state-of-the-art measuring systems was used in the test. The equipment included a positioning system (comprising GPS, reference station, inertial system and position measuring equipment), digital stereo cameras with their own computers for storing images which were used to measure distances and lane widths, an analogue scenery camera and a central measuring computer. The position of signs and the location of lay-bys etc were recorded using a touchscreen. A comprehensive appraisal of the site was conducted as a starting point in daylight. The data was captured, documented on video both in digital and analogue form and subsequently analysed in the laboratory.

* For a definition of routing and other site features, see scoring criteria and weighting below.

UK roadworks sites results by test category

1. M42 nr Birmingham

Signing/roadmarkings: Good

Traffic routing: Very good

Road surface: Very good

Night-time clarity: *Additional test, see below*

Information: Very good

OVERALL RESULT: Very good

2. M1 nr Hemel Hempstead

Signing/roadmarkings: Very good

Traffic routing: Very good

Road surface: Very good

Night-time clarity: *Additional test, see below*

Information: Very good

OVERALL RESULT: Very good

3. M1 nr Hemel Hempstead (night)

Signing/roadmarkings: Good

Traffic routing: Very good

Road surface: Very good

Night-time clarity: Very good

Information: Very good

OVERALL RESULT: Very good

4. M25 nr Cheshunt

Signing/roadmarkings: Very good

Traffic routing: Acceptable

Road surface: Very good

Night-time clarity: *Additional test, see below*

Information: Very good

OVERALL RESULT: Very good

5. M5 nr Clevedon (night)

Signing/roadmarkings: Good

Traffic routing: Good

Road surface: Very good

Night-time clarity: Good

Information: Poor

OVERALL RESULT: Good

6. M5 nr Clevedon

Signing/roadmarkings: Good

Traffic routing: Good

Road surface: Very good

Night-time clarity: *Additional test, see above*

Information: Very poor
OVERALL RESULT: Good

7. M5 nr Taunton
Signing/roadmarkings: Very good
Traffic routing: Acceptable
Road surface: Very good
Night-time clarity: Very good
Information: Very poor
OVERALL RESULT: Good

8. M25 nr Cheshunt (night)
Signing/roadmarkings: Acceptable
Traffic routing: Acceptable
Road surface: Very good
Night-time clarity: Very good
Information: Acceptable
OVERALL RESULT: Good

9. M42 nr Birmingham (night)
Signing/roadmarkings: Very good
Traffic routing: Very poor
Road surface: Very good
Night-time clarity: Very good
Information: Very good
OVERALL RESULT: Acceptable

Scoring criteria and weighting

Signs/road markings **Weighting: 40 percent**

- * Signs in advance of the roadwork site
- * Signs through the roadwork site
- * Signs at the end of the roadwork site
- * The frequency, clarity, easy recognition and condition of road signs
- * The quality of road markings and their clarity

Traffic routing **Weighting: 40 percent**

- * Width of traffic lanes
- * Lane reductions
- * Lane narrowing and contra-flow
- * Points of entry/exit within the roadwork site
- * Point of entry/exit for roadwork vehicles
- * Safety-relevant equipment

Road surface **Weighting: 5 per cent**

- * Condition
- * Cleanliness

Night-time clarity **Weighting: 10 per cent**

- * Visibility of signs and road markings
- * Protective equipment with reflectors
- * Illumination of the lead-in/exit tapers

Information **Weighting: 5 per cent**

- * Information about the type and duration of roadworks
- * Information repeated throughout the length of the roadworks

The roadwork sites were rated Very Good, Good, Acceptable, Poor and Very Poor.

Full report at http://www.aatrust.com/files/reports/28092006_EuroTest_Roadworks.pdf