Results of Driving and Travelling Consultation - 2010

Background

One of the Public Weather Service milestones for 2010/11 was to review the provision of weather information for people driving and travelling in the UK. Driving and travelling was assumed to include commuters and users of public transport as well as car drivers on short and long journeys.

Desk research conducted prior to the review proper, confirmed that there was very little weather information available tailored specifically for the needs of drivers and travellers, especially when they are on their journey. It also found that there are very limited ways of notifying people of adverse changes in weather conditions while they are travelling.

Methodology

Consultation with the general public was carried out by means of a questionnaire on the Met Office website. It had also been intended to link this questionnaire to the Sustrans1 website however they were unable to proceed with this request at this time.

Desk research into work undertaken by industry professionals such as the RoSPA, the AA and the RAC found little relevant information. However after initial engagement with the Highways Agency it was found that they had undertaken research which could inform this review and they were happy to share with us.

Results

Desk Research – Key Findings

During 2008, slippery roads due to weather conditions were a contributory factor in 11% of road user accidents resulting in fatalities and injuries. 13% of these accidents were serious or fatal2.

Although the AA and RAC have a combined membership of over 22 million they do not display weather information on their websites and offer little information on travelling in adverse conditions.

In October 2007 the Highways Agency introduced the “Driving in Severe Weather – Alert Status” to aid goods vehicles drivers to respond to severe weather warnings. They also have around 2800 Variable Message Signs (VMS) on the motorway and trunk road network in England. Recently the Highways Agency have implemented pictograms displays in three regional control areas, including pictograms for snow and strong winds. A further programme of implementation continued during Summer/Autumn 2010. The Highways Agency also provide a mobile website service and a iPhone application that includes weather watch. Weather Watch contains comprehensive Met Office provided weather forecasts which are updated as they affect England’s motorways and major roads during the Autumn and Winter seasons.

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1 Sustrans is the UK’s leading sustainable transport charity.
Traffic Scotland display disruption messages including those for adverse weather on Variable Message Signs and its website. They also pass information to media and monitoring organisations for radio broadcasts.

Traffic Wales offer free email and SMS alerts to drivers as well as highlighting weather warnings on its website.

**Highways Agency Research**

Research has been undertaken by the Highways Agency relating to travelling in severe weather as part of the National Road Users’ Satisfaction Survey (NRUSS). This report draws on the results from NRUSS surveys for April 2008 - March 2009 and April 2009 – March 2010.

**Impact of severe weather warnings on journey planning**
The majority of responders in 2008/09 (56%) and 2009/10 (54%) said their journeys or journey plans had been affected by a severe weather warning. The type of weather varied by time of year, but heavy rain and snow were most likely to result in journeys being abandoned.

The majority of people who received warnings while planning a journey did so by TV (52% in 2008/09 and 57% in 2009/10). Local and national radio stations are also other important sources. This agrees with previous PWS surveys. PWS public surveys conducted after 7 early warnings in 2008/09 revealed TV was the main delivery channel for warnings (80%) and radio the second highest (25%). However a significant number (slightly less than a quarter) found out about severe weather by ‘experiencing or seeing it’.

About a third of people abandoned their travel plans in 2009/10 as a result of a severe weather warning. This was up from 16% in 2008/09 and is possibly a consequence of the particularly snowy winter in 2009/10. A further 37% changed their route or delayed starting their journey or took extra precautions (such as checks to vehicles). Ice and fog warnings prompt precautions to be taken more than other weather types.

Most people who changed their travel plans did so on the day of the journey (73%) while 23% made the decision one day in advance.

**Impact of severe weather warnings on journeys**
The most likely weather type that travellers received a severe weather warning about en route was heavy rain (32% in 2009/10). The least likely weather type was ice (6%). However, just under half of travellers (49%) said it made no effect on their journey and the travelled as planned. Flooding was the type of weather warning most likely to have an impact, with 33% of responders whose journeys were affected changing route. 36% of people said they had encountered severe weather while travelling, that they had had no prior warning of, heavy rain being the most common unexpected weather type.

Most people who received warnings during their journey did so via VMS, although 51% said it had no effect on their journey.

Drivers, particularly those who drive for a living, are more likely to use the motorways and trunk roads in the event of severe weather.

**Summary of Highways Agency survey information**
• Overall, slightly more than half those who use the motorways and truck roads have had their journey affected by weather warnings. This proportion increases to around 75% when only people who drive for a living are considered.
• Drivers don’t plan more than a day in advance.
• Most do take notice of severe weather warnings and do something about it.
• Most people get their information before travelling from the TV.
• BBC National and local radio was also an important source of information.
• Most people get their weather information on route from VMS (60% in 2008/09).
• Drivers are more likely to use motorways than truck roads in the event of severe weather.

**PWSCG Public Questionnaire Results**

The PWSCG questionnaire was available to the public on the Met office website from the 2nd to the 21st of June 2010 and 213 replies were received.

A large majority of people (68%) said that the car was their main mode of transport, with only 12% choosing to walk. 94% of respondents see or hear a weather forecast once a day or more.

As with previous consultation, more than half of the respondents said they currently use the internet for weather information. Another 22% get weather information from the TV and 14% from the radio. However, when given the choice of where they would like to obtain weather information in the future only 28% said internet, 22% said TV (same amount as current use), 19% said radio, 14% and 8% said mobile and iPhone and 7% said they would like to get weather information from the newspapers, no-one said they currently use newspapers for this purpose.

The Met Office is used by 41% of the respondents for weather information and 30% use the BBC.

The results for where respondents would like to obtain weather information when away from home were quite evenly spread. 25% said the internet, 22% said mobile phone, 15% said radio, and 13% said television, 12% newspapers and 11% iPhone.

The respondents were asked to choose the top three pieces of information they would like when planning a journey. 24% said rainfall, 14% said probabilities, 13% said minimum temperature, 10% said visibility and 9% said wind speed.

21% of the people asked said they would like to see the latest observation when planning a journey, 19% said they would like a one day forecast 15% would like hourly and five day forecasts, 14% three hourly forecasts and only 7% would like forecasts for longer than five days. Half of the people asked would like the forecast updated hourly, 30% said three hourly and 10% said twice a day.

49% of the respondents asked for a driving weather forecast to be in it own area of the website. However, 33% said they didn’t mind where the information was. 90% of all the respondents would like to be able to customise the information.

**Summary**

• The majority of people see or hear the weather forecast at least once a day.
• Most people use the internet or TV to obtain weather information when at home.
• The internet and mobile phone were the most request places to obtain weather information when away from home.
• Rainfall, probabilities, minimum temperature and visibility are important to people when planning a journey.
• Journeys are not normally planned more than one day ahead therefore the latest observation and one day forecasts are required.
• People would prefer weather information to be updated hourly or at least three hourly.
• A high majority of people would like to be able to customise their weather information.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were made based on the findings of the Met Office online questionnaire (June 2010) and the Highway Agency National Road Users' Satisfaction Surveys (2008/09 & 2009/10).

1. Increase reach and consistency of severe weather warnings:
   a. Approach the Highways Agency, Traffic Scotland and Traffic Wales to discuss the possibility of relaying severe weather warnings on VMS using, where possible, pictogram signs, as people are more likely to use motorways than truck roads in the event of severe weather. Criteria for displaying warnings should be consistent with new NSWWS criteria.
   b. Investigate allowing reports of severe weather to be input via RDS as with traffic reports, post the implementation of the new NSWWS.

2. Increase relevance of severe weather warnings:
   a. Weather forecasts should be updated frequently (hourly or three hourly), as people delay journeys on the strength of them.

3. Increase flexibility of access to weather forecast and warning information
   a. Provide driving forecast on a separate page on the Met Office website and ensure it can be used via mobile phones (all platforms).
   b. Include the option to view probabilistic information.

Next steps

The PWSCG Secretariat will liaise with the relevant bodies to take forward recommendation 1 and is arranging to meet with the BBC to discuss the inclusion of weather warnings on RDS, post the implementation of the new NSWWS.

The Met Office is to investigate the provision of recommendations. Detailed proposals including costs and feasibility should be provided by 30th September 2010.