

Road Collision Reporting Guidelines

CONSULTATION REPORT



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is a growing body of evidence of the powerful impact media reporting has on public attitudes to road safety. Using research and conversations with those in the road safety field and with our working group, we identified problem areas in reporting on road collisions, such as stories that were absent key players, and some solutions, such as describing the mechanics of a collision without implying blame. This formed the beginnings of guidelines to help journalists report the facts of road collisions without hindering broader efforts to tackle road danger.

The draft Road Collision Reporting Guidelines consultation elicited a large response from organisations and individuals, from health to road safety professionals and interested members of the public. There was strong overall support for the draft Guidelines (97.5% supported wholly or in part) and their principles, and many respondents expressed strong feelings that guidelines are needed to improve public discourse, and with it road safety. There were calls for more ambitious aims in this regard.

Individual and organisational responses highlighted a widespread concern around some road users' attitudes, especially towards cyclists, and perceived links between negative media coverage and behaviour on the roads.

Many respondents felt the Guidelines, if adopted, could help reduce conflict between road users. There was a sense of their potential to improve driving standards by raising awareness of the scale of road death and injury, and people's roles in preventing harm. This could in turn help more people feel safe walking and cycling, some felt, with potential health benefits such as increased physical activity and fewer road collisions.

Many respondents offered constructive feedback. Some said the draft Guidelines appeared too 'cycle centric' and needed to incorporate other vulnerable road users more effectively, and we sought to incorporate this in the revised Guidelines. Others raised issues we had not addressed, such as discussions in comment sections and on social media, with views that comments on road collision reports should be switched off, to discourage potentially harmful debates apportioning blame before the full facts are known. While social media is an important issue, our focus is on traditional media reporting and advice on this would be beyond our scope, hence the addition of a brief Guidelines postscript on the issue.

Some respondents did not see a need for the Guidelines, feeling that language has little impact on attitudes, and targeting the issue risks distracting from more concrete efforts to improve road safety. A few respondents felt the Guidelines sought by default to blame drivers for collisions, or that they were asking journalists to distort the facts – which was not our intention but were perceptions we recognised needed addressing.

We would like to thank the people and organisations who responded to the consultation.

Consultation responses, and subsequent conversations, including with journalists and media professionals, were a huge help in steering development of what we hope are a useful set of Guidelines. This process could be characterised as balancing the concerns of the road safety community with the realities of the newsroom and the constraints journalists work within.

Respondents told us the Guidelines needed to be shorter and clearer for use in a newsroom. At times they expected too much of journalists and tried to

tackle too many issues beyond the scope of such a document. They needed to more closely reflect the reality of reporting on road collisions on the ground. With this in mind we took time to redraft the Guidelines and thus delayed their launch. We dropped some clauses, such as advising against using ‘cyclist’ and added others, such as an on the dangers of using footage apparently filmed behind the wheel.

The most difficult clause tackled the mechanics of a collision. Evidence shows referring to a vehicle in place of a person, such as ‘car and pedestrian in collision’, can lead readers to focus attention, and therefore a degree of blame, on the one named human actor, skewing perceptions before all the facts are known. ‘Driver and pedestrian in collision’ neutralises that risk. Journalists often know little from emergency services in the immediate aftermath of a collision and must treat collisions even-handedly – but it is important the resulting information gap does not prematurely invite

blame on either side. There are cases, such as ‘HGV driver in collision with pram’ that remain problematic, however – and we have tried to address this issue specifically by suggesting ‘HGV driver collides with child in pushchair’ instead.

While we are grateful for the input of our working group, and supporters all of whom we would like to thank for giving their time and expertise we would like to make clear the Guidelines, along with this report, were written independently of those individuals and their organisations.

In conclusion we were buoyed by the strong level of response and support the draft Guidelines received, we have listened to concerns and comments, and responded to feedback – and we hope the Guidelines reflect that. We hope they will become an industry standard for reporting on road collisions, and adopted by consensus by news and other relevant organisations.



BACKGROUND

In the UK every year around 1,700 people are killed and 26,000 seriously injured in road traffic collisions - while many more suffer the daily impact of dangerous roads. Road collisions remain the biggest killer of young people aged 5-29 - a threat that has become so commonplace we accept it as the price of mobility.

While good media reporting can inform the public about road danger, its causes, and solutions, there is growing evidence some language can confuse or misdirect concern regarding road safety and who is to blame, hampering action that could save lives and, in the worst cases, engendering aggression on the roads.

With a little guidance on reporting, from avoiding language that prematurely attributes blame or risk, to providing context on wider road safety issues and trends, publishers can help provide clarity on the issues. This includes avoiding use of the term 'accident', which can inadvertently depict crashes as unavoidable, as well as by characterising road users as people, rather than simply the vehicles they use.

The draft Road Collision Reporting Guidelines are the start of a process bringing together research, and the expertise of those working across road safety, policing, journalism and media, to provide a guide that journalists, broadcasters and editors can follow, to help them do their jobs, while avoiding inadvertently negative impacts of that work.

The draft Guidelines were produced by the Active Travel Academy in collaboration with representatives from national roads policing, legal, academic and media experts, road safety charities, and the National Union of Journalists' ethics council, and advised by IMPRESS.

Main aims of the RCRG

The way we talk about issues influences our attitudes towards those issues and the media sets the agenda and influences thinking in many areas of our lives, including health and road safety. These guidelines are not intended to curb press freedom; their purpose is to act as a supplement to existing industry codes of practice to help journalists, publishers and broadcasters produce the highest standards of reporting on road collisions.

The intended outcome of the Guidelines is to form an "industry standard" to help pave the way for better reporting in reporting and broadcasting and, ultimately, support reporters, editors and broadcasters in their work reporting on road collisions. The Guidelines were produced with input from a range of expertise, but they are not set in stone, and our hope is they will be updated regularly to include evolving knowledge and research on the topics, with ongoing input from relevant organisations and those with expertise in the field.

The Guidelines' ten main clauses speak to core journalistic principles of accuracy, fairness, non-discrimination and justice.

CONSULTATION

The main goal of our consultation was to gather views on the proposed Guidelines, to help inform how they may affect interested people, bodies and industries, and to receive suggestions for improvements.

In order to gather as many diverse views as possible from the public and interested organisations, we held an online consultation, emails and phone conversations.

The public consultation took place over six weeks, between 28 September and 8 November 2020. The main methods for collecting feedback were via the website using a simple web form: <https://www.rc-rg.com/consultation> and via email at consultation@rc-rg.com.

During the consultation period, we sought to promote engagement in the consultation and invite a broad range of responses. We advertised the consultation period through a press release sent out by email via the Gorkana media database on 27 September, targeting relevant publications such as journalistic trade titles or those covering road safety or transport, as well as in a general release on the website.

The consultation was also shared on social media, along with a comment piece published on the Guardian's Bike Blog, written by Guidelines author Laura Laker,

and Martin Porter QC, on the day the consultation launched. The story was covered as news by a variety of mainstream media in print and on radio, as well as by media trade publications. The consultation was also flagged via various membership organisations' electronic mailouts and newsletters, across road safety, media and political organisations, from the All-Party Parliamentary Walking and Cycling Group, RoadPeace, Cycling UK and the NUJ, who flagged the Guidelines consultation, encouraging subscribers to respond.

The RCRG and the consultation were covered fairly extensively as news, albeit not always accurately, in national outlets such as the Daily Mail, and The Times, and radio talk shows BBC 5Live and LBC, as well as by Forbes online. Media trade publications holdthefrontpage.com and Press Gazette, and the NUJ also covered the consultations as news.

We followed up by emailing local and national news outlets to highlight the consultation and encourage further responses from the media industry.

We also conducted one-to-one telephone interviews with journalists with extensive experience, both in teaching journalism, and reporting on road collisions first hand, and other media professionals.

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Online survey responses

The web form contained three main questions, each with a box for a free text response: Do you agree with the principles of the Road Collision Reporting Guidelines (Y/N)?; How do you predict the Reporting Guidelines will affect you or your industry? and What, if any, changes would you like to see to the Reporting Guidelines? The responses to these questions provided a strong understanding of the overall support for the Road Collision Reporting Guidelines.

In total, we received 198 responses from individuals, 184 via the online survey and 14 via email. Of the 198 individual responses, four were from academia, five from respondents in media organisations, one from an elected member of a local authority, three from policing, and nine from the corporate sector. Another 16 respondents referred to their work in the relevant sectors, e.g., health, policing or traffic safety. 193 respondents were based in the UK, and five were based in other countries.

In addition, we received 28 responses from relevant active travel and road safety organisations and charities, including the AA, Road Peace, Living Streets, the National Police Chiefs Council's National Lead for Roads Policing, Cycling UK and Cycling Scotland, Action Vision Zero, the European Cyclists' Federation, Sustrans, and the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Road Safety, as well as Transport for London and the London Cycling Campaign. There was an overall support from these stakeholders, and many suggested the principles could be more ambitious.

Of the 182 individual responses, in total 72% (139) agreed with the principles of the Road Collision Reporting Guidelines, and 21% (38) respondents indirectly expressed their support for the principles of the Road

Collision Reporting Guidelines in their comments and answers to the other questions. A total of five respondents partially agreed with the principles of the Road Collision Reporting Guidelines.

From the 182 responses, 2.5% (5) five respondents did not agree with the principles of the Road Collision Reporting Guidelines and one respondent expressed neither support nor disagreement with the principles. We interpreted these numbers as a majority support for the Guidelines.

As we can see from the comments below, many respondents who expressed their support for the RCRG also highlighted an urgent need for the media to adopt appropriate language when reporting on collisions.

Some examples of responses:

“wholeheartedly - can't come too soon”

“this is a brilliant move and one that I thoroughly approve of. I experience a lot of anger when I cycle and I am sure that media depictions of me -- a middle aged professor -- as a 'lycra lout' feeds into that”

“Thanks for doing this piece of work - I think it's really important.”

“I fully support your aims. I live in Ireland and would love to see your initiative rolled out over here.”

“I completely support this initiative, it's an excellent piece of work and long overdue”

A common reason for respondent support was a significant level of concern about the impact of language and reporting on the safety of those walking and cycling in particular. Individuals voiced concerns over the impact of road collision reporting that doesn't always accurately reflect harm and risk, at times normalising that risk and at worst inflaming tensions on the roads.

“The impact of sub-standard driving is enormous: on lives, on families, on medical treatment, on the economy; but as a society we are generally blind to this. The current language around incident reporting normalises the carnage (for that is what it is) and makes people immune to the gravity of the issue”

“The way much of the media inflates so-called ‘road wars’ is so irresponsible and dangerous”

“They are pretty good but I would like to see a greater commitment to improving the public understanding of risk and bias, for example comparing cycling fatalities to the deaths caused by drivers to deaths from shark attacks or plane crashes. I would also like to see the media reflect a more investigative approach to reporting”

The second question on the online form asked respondents how they predict the Reporting Guidelines would affect them or their industry. Out of 182 individual respondents, 150 left comments, 29 left the question blank and three replied N/A.

Most of the 150 respondents who commented, 80% (120), reported a belief the Guidelines would have a significant impact on their lives or their industry. Respondents most commonly believe this will improve safety and perceptions of safety on the roads, with some hoping the Guidelines will

help reduce road casualties. Many also believe the Guidelines, if implemented, could contribute to a more balanced treatment of road users in the media, with the potential to reduce conflict on the roads, and ultimately help more people feel safe cycling and walking.

“Positively - it's very common for people to mention anti cycling things and I cycle less because of a fear that a motorist would injure me. Part of the attitude problem comes from how the image of cyclists killed or injured is presented in the media”

“It will make roads safer for cyclists and reduce the aggression many cyclists and pedestrians face from drivers when walking or cycling”

“As a retired GP and keen cyclist, I have had a number of perspectives on this over the years. The bottom line is that death and injury on the roads are much more common than people realise - and are usually the result of human choices not ‘accidents’. Peoples misunderstanding of all this is due to skewed reporting. The toll will not reduce until we all understand what is going on - and this won't happen till reporting becomes more accurate. So, this guidance is much needed”

“As a cycle instructor, I feel these guidelines are vitally important. Language is far more powerful than most of us are willing to admit. We need to change our language so that everyone starts to accept their own responsibilities on the road”

“I hope that it will change attitudes, and that this change of attitudes will save lives and reduce life-changing injuries. I am a Consultant in Paediatric Intensive Care. Every week my hospital sees 4-5 children and young people who have been seriously injured by drivers and in an average year we will have 3-4 deaths. That’s over 200 kids in one children’s hospital in a year. Multiply that across the country”

On the contrary, 11 respondents who agreed with the principles of the RCRG said they expect the RCRG to have no impact or minimal impact on their lives or their industry. The main reasons, as we can see from some comments below, are around a lack of control over social media comments on news, or that Guidelines would be unenforceable

“I doubt they will have much effect, but I believe strongly in the promotion of neutral unprejudiced language in public discourse”

“I cannot see these guidelines having much effect as it will make little or no impression on comments on social media, by far and away how many people obtain local news”

“Possibly a small improvement in reporting or public perception, although the latter will be almost impossible to measure.”

Three respondents who did not agree with the principles of the RCRG said they don’t believe the Guidelines will have any impacts. The main reasons given were that they do not think language and tone is the main issue and they believe the Guidelines are biased and contribute to negative portrayals of drivers as the main cause of collisions.

“They will not affect my use of the English language. The problem is not a language one and this just seems likely to divert attention from what really needs to be done”

“They seek to establish a climate of blame in which drivers are regarded as the cause of accidents while cyclists are inherently blame free. They ignore evidence. There is an assumption of blame. They do not respect common English usage: for example in seeking to apportion blame before it is established, by banning the common English usage of accident. They do not permit the reporting of foolish behaviour from non-motorists, such as cycling in dark clothing at night. One group of road users is subject to a presumption of guilt”

The third question asked respondents what changes, if any, they would like to see to the Reporting Guidelines. This left a free space for people to comment on the changes they wanted for the RCRG principles. This helped give us a better understanding of how people perceived the Guidelines and how they could be improved.

Of the 182 responses we received from individuals, 29% (54) did not respond to this question. From the total of 131 respondents who did answer, 33 % (43) said they did not think the Guidelines needed any changes.

“None, they are fine as they are. Journalism needs to stick to the facts rather than distorting them for the sake of a story”

However, the other 70% of respondents expressed a desire for some changes to the guidelines. The main themes that emerged are summarised below.

Comments or criticism of the general tone of the draft Guidelines, their use of language or length:

“Not all the guidelines are as clear as I would like. In comparison to the guidelines on reporting a death by suicide, they seem to need some ‘reading between the lines’ and/or some deciphering”

“As a journalist I have the Samaritans’ guidelines in front of me whenever I write about a suicide – these guidelines need to be as simple and as clear as those, if they are to be used”

“My biggest single issue with the Reporting Guidelines is that it’s overly-long - few journalists (or editors) will actually bother to read it”

“I welcome the guidelines, but recommend making them appear more objective to the journalists who won’t want to follow them. As currently drafted, they assume cyclists and pedestrians are victims, and car drivers are law-breakers. While this may be true, it could be perceived as displaying the very kind of prejudice (in reverse) that it endeavours to overcome”

Suggestions regarding greater use and clarification of evidence to support the case for Guidelines, and the use of examples for journalists to follow:

“I would like to see clear, tabulated examples of good and bad practice as examples for journalists to use. In other words, extracting the meaning of the guidelines and showing how they can be put into practice”

“You justify some of the proposals with empirical claims. I think the empirical evidence is much more strongly in your support than is suggested. I’d like to see the empirical evidence figure more prominently”

Comments or remarks around adoption or raising awareness of the draft Guidelines – and any potential sanctions for ‘breaches’:

“Some idea of how the reporting guidelines will be implemented. ie having drafted a worthy document it is of little value if not signed up to by mainstream media outlets and or the relevant press regulators. If some context can be provided on next steps to get the buy-in of such groups it would be highly relevant”

Specific comments relating to areas or issues respondents felt weren’t addressed in the draft Guidelines:

“Comments to articles should not be permitted where there has been a death or serious injury until after any legal proceedings have been completed”

“I’d like to see guidelines specifically around online publishing to discourage the use of reader comments on articles where death or serious injury have occurred. It doesn’t contribute to the debate to have one sided comments posted against articles and potentially goes a long way to ‘undo’ the main rationale behind these reporting guidelines”

“Publishers, particularly those that pay readers for their pictures and videos, should be very mindful of user generated content, especially avoiding using anything that has been filmed or captured by someone who is clearly behind the wheel of a vehicle, as this normalises this kind of behaviour”

Some respondents misunderstood our powers or intentions with the Guidelines:

“I think they seem very pragmatic. I would be interested to know what sanction there will be for new outlets ignoring these?”

“They just need to be adhered to by the press and when they are ignored proper fines and punishments need handing out”

One-to-one discussions with journalists and editors

In phone conversations with professional journalists and editors a number of themes emerged, including that the draft Guidelines were too long, the clauses and tones too didactic and the rationale or evidence behind the Guidelines themselves unclear or underplayed. Not all professionals agreed ‘accident’ is always problematic, for example, and others felt avoiding the term ‘cyclist’, although research shows it may have negative connotations, is impractical. From these conversations, most of which were off-record as journalists or editors were speaking from personal working experience and expertise and not on behalf of news organisations, we gained a better understanding of the realities of reporting, the challenges faced by reporters today, and what information may or may not be available, as well as what is considered good practice in reporting on road collisions. We tried to take a pragmatic approach in altering the Guidelines to those practical needs, challenges and professional standards of working reporters and editors. Subsequent conversations with senior national news organisations and journalists on the resulting Guidelines, which we will launch at the same time as this report, suggests this has been largely successful, and the resulting document a workable guide for publishers, journalists, and editors.

Road safety and active travel relevant organisations

Summary of relevant national and local road safety organisations and charities that support the principles of the draft Road Collision Reporting Guidelines

Organisation	Overall Support
United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Road Safety, Jean Todt	Yes
RoadPeace	Yes
Brake (the road safety charity)	Yes
The Automobile Association	Yes
NPCC Lead for Roads Policing (on behalf of Chief Constable Anthony Bangham)	Yes
European Cyclists' Federation	Yes
Sustrans	Yes
Living Streets	Yes
Cycling UK	Yes
The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA)	Partially
Action Vision Zero	Yes
Press Desk – Streets and Policing, Transport for London	Yes
BRITISH MOTORCYCLISTS FEDERATION	Partially
Road Danger Reduction Forum	Yes
The Future of Transport	Mostly yes
road.cc	Yes
Road Traffic Accident Law (Scotland) LLP	Yes
Cycling Scotland	Yes
London Cycling Campaign	Yes
Retford Cycling Campaign (CIO)	Yes
Transit Jam	Yes
Gonzalo Rodriguez Foundation	Assumed
Bricycles, Brighton & Hove Cycling Campaign	Yes
Cycling UK (West Wilts rep)	Yes
Stirling Cycle Training	Assumed
Westminster Healthy streets	Yes
Harrogate District Cycle Action	Yes
Wandsworth Living Streets	Yes

MAIN FINDINGS

The most common views (in order of popularity) that emerged from the responses are summarised below:

- There was an overall strong support for the RCRG and its principles, both from individual respondents and key stakeholders, with many expressly welcoming this piece of work
- Many comments called for more ambitious aims, perhaps highlighting how crucial changes to language are
- Respondents felt the Guidelines are needed to help people feel safer on the roads and improve safety
- Many respondents felt the Guidelines could specifically help reduce societal/media bias against cyclists
- Some respondents felt more comprehensive or stronger evidence should be provided, with tabulated examples of good and bad practice as a guide for publishers
- Many respondents felt the guidelines, if adopted, could help reduce conflict between road users along with the stigmatisation of cyclists
- There was a sense of the Guidelines' potential impact on health and road collision rates by improving attitudes around safe driving standards, helping people feel safer walking and cycling
- Several respondents felt the draft Guidelines were too cycle-centric, and should include greater coverage of other vulnerable road users
- There were suggestions publishers should close comments on road collision reports to prevent harmful comments, before investigations were complete



