



APPG for Roadside Rescue and Recovery – red lights DfT submission

The APPG for Roadside Rescue and Recovery believes recovery operators ought to be permitted to use prominent red warning beacons in conjunction with amber warning beacons while attending accidents and breakdowns. At present, recovery operators are only permitted to fit and use amber warning beacons while attending incidents.

The argument for our position is three-fold:

1. Red light beacons provide the fastest detection times among road users, and there is a further effect due to psychological associations of the colour red in the minds of road users;
2. The risks faced by roadside rescue and recovery operators in the performance of their duties are at least as great as those faced by vehicles currently allowed to use red warning beacons under UK law, and are and considerably greater than those permitted to use amber warning beacons;
3. The proposal has overwhelming support amongst representative industry groups, has received support from the police, and the industry has already taken steps to demonstrate how the use of red lights would be regulated, allaying concerns of abuse.

Scientific evidence

The warning beacons system the APPG is proposing – red and orange light interspersed with one another – was suggested in the most advanced study of its kind into the detection times and conspicuity (which “refers to the ability of a warning beacon to draw attention to its presence even when road users are not actively looking for it”) of emergency warning beacons. The Loughborough University study¹ assessed the detection times of various warning beacon colours used on UK roads – Red, Amber, Green, Blue – against the various disbenefits of the lights, most notably the effect of disability glare, which has the effect of increasing danger by blinding road users. The paper found that “a red light (equated in intensity to amber) and used in a flashing mode alongside a flashing amber beacon is likely to offer the best compromise in terms of detection, disability glare and discomfort glare.” Additionally, in its recommendations, made specifically for UK roads, the study suggests that breakdown vehicles be able to use red warning beacons “at incidents when personnel are on the carriageway (vehicle closest to approaching traffic only)” – a situation recovery personnel often find themselves in and would therefore justify red warning beacons being fitted and used.

There is a further effect due to the psychological effects of the colour red, as it elicits a more serious reaction in road users approaching a hazard. Red is seen to signify a more serious incident than amber lights, and so road users accordingly take more caution. Research has found there is an implicit red-danger psychological association. A 2013 study into the red-danger association “confirm[ed] the wisdom of using red to communicate danger in systematic signal systems, and

¹ <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/dspace-jspui/bitstream/2134/520/1/TT779%20AR2183.pdf>



suggest that red may be used more broadly in other communication contexts to efficiently convey danger-relevant information.”² In one experiment in the study, for example, the researchers presented words on a screen in one of three colours: red, grey or green. Participants had to categorise the words as being danger words or safety words. The reaction time to identify the words in the danger category was quicker when the words were red than when they were green or grey. The same sort of effect was found with danger symbols rather than words: red danger symbols are more quickly categorised as danger symbols than, say, green danger symbols. In other words, although this is a psychological effect, there are implications for performance. Reaction times for red lights among road users will be quicker than for amber, and they would be more likely to change behaviour in a way that could save a recovery operators life.

A common sense change in the law

The current UK law that governs the use of lights on vehicles is the Road Vehicles Lightings Regulations 1989. All road vehicles (not including cyclists) are prohibited from emitting red light forwards. Fire Services Vehicles are exempt; they are permitted to use “*a red and white chequered domed lamp, or a red and white segmented mast-mounted warning beacon*” which is “*intended for use at the scene of an emergency*”.³

The Road Traffic Management Act 2004 provides Highways England Traffic Officers the ability to use red lights in their regulation of traffic around accidents and other road incidents. Highways England contend that Highways England Traffic Officers only use red lights in live lanes – to close the lane and direct traffic. The reality on the ground, though, is that Highways England Traffic Officers in fact use red lights routinely on the hard shoulder – the suggestion they don’t, when put to senior representatives from the recovery industry during the APPG’s select committee-style hearing, was met with laughter and derision, so much of a departure was it from recovery operators experience on the ground.

The APPG argues the work of roadside rescue and recovery operators is no less dangerous than being a firefighter at the scene of the crash, once the situation is stabilised to the point where the firefighters are no longer endangered by their efforts to extinguish fires, prevent explosions and extract persons etc. Recovery operators face the same risks, if not more, as Fire Service Men and Women and Highways England Traffic Officers once the situation is stable as vehicles continue to pass at high speeds. Therefore, recovery workers ought to be afforded the same lighting protections.

The APPG also believes there is a clear contrast between the risks involved for recovery operators and those other vehicles permitted to use amber flashing beacons under UK law. The primary use of amber warning beacons are for vehicles that are either particularly wide (exceeding 2.9m in width) or particularly slow (a maximum speed of less than 25mph) and are *used while the vehicle is in motion* to warn other road users.⁴ The APPG is only proposing recovery operators be permitted to use red lights *while* stationary. There are, however, other vehicles permitted to use amber lights in the performance of their duties on the roadside. These include: road clearance workers (ie of snow, ice etc); road inspectors and surveyors; those clearing the road of debris. A crucial distinction

² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00140139.2014.889220?needAccess=true>

³ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1989/1796/contents/made>

⁴ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/1989/1796/contents/made>



between the risks involved in these activities and those of recovery workers is due to the times at which these functions can be carried out. Road inspectors and surveyors and clearance workers can choose non-peak times to carry out their work, whereas recovery workers – like firefighters and the emergency services – are by definition often required to be at the roadside when traffic is at its busiest.

Widespread industry support

In the response to the APPG for Roadside Rescue and Recovery's safety inquiry carried out during the summer of 2019, there was overwhelming support in the industry for red lights as a solution to some of the safety issues facing recovery operators. Those who – unprompted – raised red warning beacons as a potential solution included The AA, the RAC, The European Rescue and Recovery Initiative (ERRI), the National Tyre Distributors Association (NTDA), the Roadside Rescue and Recovery Association (RRRA), and the Recovery Industry Support Charity (RISC).⁵

In addition, the APPG received evidence from the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) and Chief Constable Anthony Bangham, head of Roads Policing at the NPCC.⁶ The evidence submitted by the NPCC recognised that “improving the safety of those integral to roadside rescue and recovery activity on our roads, is in line with [their] national strategy and something we would support” and going on to claim they:

- “would welcome improved visual indications of recovery work in progress”
- “are not minded to state red flashing lights are the preserve of the police”
- “would seek a common minimum standard and industry guidelines concerning use of such lights”

This last point falls out of concerns that there are at present already some recovery operators which do not follow best practice, and who may, given permission to use red lights, may abuse the privilege by using them irresponsibly.

To this end, the industry has already taken steps to ensure there are standards in place to regulate the use of red lights. The Institute of Vehicle Recovery (IVR) have drafted strict best practice guidelines to govern the use of red lights amongst recovery operators, should a change in the law be effected. The IVR is an internationally recognised organisation that works alongside the Health and Safety Executive, Highways England and many other professional bodies to focus on the reduction of roadside injuries and fatalities through excellence in training and safety procedures.

⁵ All submissions can be found here: <https://www.csrrr.co.uk/appg-for-roadside-rescue-and-recovery/>

⁶ <https://www.csrrr.co.uk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/APPG-NPCC.pdf>