Alcohol and Drug Impaired Driving in the UK: Recent Trends and Future Prospects

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Recent trends in drink driving in the UK have shown an increase in the level of driver fatalities over the 0.08% limit. This is almost certainly related to a decreasing level of traffic enforcement and an associated reduced level of roadside breath testing.

The latter trend has also seen a substantially increased level of those drivers testing positive for alcohol at the roadside over the past 5 years. It needs to be established whether this trend is due to a ‘real’ increase in the incidence of drink driving or better targeting of offenders.

Legislation was enacted in 2005 to allow for roadside evidential breath testing, but thus far no devices have received government approval for police use. It is expected that such approval will be authorised during 2008. The UK government is committed to providing central funding for such devices, rather than requiring individual police forces to find funds from limited resources.

In a parallel initiative, the development of roadside screening devices which record breath alcohol concentration as well, as personal and demographic data, is also being encouraged for UK use. Such devices would allow a much clearer picture of the extent of drink driving, including those driving with positive alcohol levels below the current UK drink drive level. This data will be important in providing data for a new UK consultation on reducing the limit to 0.05%, due later in 2007.

The UK government is committed to providing central funding for such devices, rather than requiring individual police forces to fund this initiative. Both actions are aimed at tackling an increasing trend in drink driving over recent years.

On the drug driving scene, despite legislation in 2003 allowing for drug screening devices to be used at the roadside, no such devices have yet received government approval. This is particularly disappointing as there is increasing evidence that drug driving is a significant problem in the UK, and many other countries seem to be having increased success in addressing this issue.

These trends and initiatives in drink and drug driving will be discussed together with options for progressing UK policy in near future.

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