5th March 2015 - Transport: Accident Prevention

**Baroness Grey-Thompson (CB):** My Lords, I welcome the debate that the noble Earl, Lord Attlee, has tabled. I declare that I sit on the board of Transport for London, which is listed in my interests on the register. I also chair the surface transport panel and sit on the safety, sustainability and accessibility panel, where these very tragic circumstances are discussed, as well as being reported and debated at the main board.

Being a board member has been an eye-opener in terms of the rules and regulations that govern this area. It would be easy to assume that it might be slightly simpler, but it is with a heavy heart that I hear of any tragedy on the road. As a very slow recreational cyclist when a member of Cleveland Wheelers, but also when I was wheelchair racing, most of my training was done on the roads*.* Two friends of mine have been killed on the roads by cars, not in the UK, and a number of friends have been injured cycling, my husband included. Perhaps very fortunately, he ended up with a spinal cord injury rather than being another of the number of fatalities.

I have been hit twice on the road while training at T-junctions when I had the right of way. I was able to recognise that the driver was not looking correctly, took evasive action and was left with nothing more than a few bruises and a couple of black eyes, but it is very shocking when it happens to you and it makes you think very carefully about everything else that is on the road.

The noble Lord, Lord Berkeley, is right about peer pressure. I have seen a change in London in the past year or so with the increased number of cyclists: when somebody jumps a light, other cyclists shout and tell them to be more careful.

In London, heavy goods vehicles are overrepresented in fatal collisions with cyclists and pedestrians. Between 2008 and 2013, 55% of all pedal cycle fatalities involved an HGV. In 2013, 20% of pedestrian fatalities involved an HGV. I would like to see more direct action to improve the safety of the most vulnerable road users, such as cyclists and pedestrians, but support is needed.

There are many issues, many of which have been most ably covered by other noble Lords in the Chamber. The first for me, though, is that some HGVs, which are overrepresented in fatalities, are exempt from basic safety features. The requirement for HGV side guards under the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986 does not apply to certain vehicles,

“designed and constructed for special purposes”.

Should there really be vehicles that have this special-purpose designation? Older HGVs, so pre-2007, are also exempt from close proximity class V and VI safety mirrors designed to address vehicle blind spots. In September 2015, the Safer Lorry Scheme will come into force in London. This will require HGVs registered after 1983 and driven in London to have side and class V and VI mirrors fitted.

I agree with noble Lords who say that the DfT has been a bit slow in its proposal to consult on removing side-guard exemptions for certain HGVs. Their planned consultation will cover only HGVs first registered after 2010. The proposal is also expected to consult on the retrofitting of class V and VI mirrors to all HGVs first registered from 2000. Will the Minister consider whether the consultation should seek public and industry opinion on retrofitting these safety features to vehicles registered from 1983?

Many operators are investing in vehicle safety technology and camera systems, but it is an emerging market, and an awful lot more could be done. There are many that claim to solve the problem, but I think this can be confusing for a number of operators, and I believe that the DfT should work with TfL and other relevant organisations to develop and communicate performance-based criteria for safety systems that are technology-neutral.

Other noble Lords have mentioned the European Commission and its review of weights and dimensions. Will the Minister tell us if the Government will declare their position on this proposal and actively support the Commission’s recommendation to ensure the next generation of HGVs is fit for 21st-century streets?

Under driver training, drivers have to undergo 35 hours of training over five years. This covers rationalisation of fuel consumption, and may cover first aid, manual handling and customer care. All these are very important, but a driver could achieve the full CPC qualification with no training covering driving standards and road safety. It seems crazy to me that we are not taking these seriously and are not including some of the most obvious things.

The noble Lord, Lord Berkeley, mentioned workplace deaths and work-related road deaths. The management of work-related road risk lags behind the management of more general health and safety. I would like to see the Government review the regulations governing this. In the short term, perhaps an approved code of practice could be published on the management of work-related road risk.

Finally, a consistent national approach is needed to improve HGV/cycle safety. I have talked about London, and it is probably in London that these things are reported more often, but accidents like this are happening all over the country that might just make the local news but would not make the national news. I do not think that a lot of people are aware of the number of fatalities that happen in this way. The Government have recently announced £114 million of funding for Cycle City Ambition, in addition to the £94 million awarded in August 2013. The eight cities are Birmingham, Bristol, Cambridge, Leeds, Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich and Oxford.

TfL has significant experience in dealing with HGV/cycle safety and has developed proven initiatives aimed at raising operator and driver awareness. The noble Earl, Lord Attlee, mentioned CLOCS. There is also Safe Urban Driving, which is a driver CPC accredited course in which drivers undergo an on-cycle hazardous awareness module. That has had a great deal of success. There is also an award-winning Fleet Operator Recognition Scheme, which has been recently rolled out nationally.

Does the Minister agree that we should strongly encourage Cycle City Ambition to adopt and support these existing initiatives? That will save money, not by designing new standards but by ensuring that operators have national consistency. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. A lot of good work is happening, but there is not enough awareness.

Finally, once again I congratulate the noble Earl, Lord Attlee, as well as the noble Lord, Lord Berkeley, on his passion for cycling—I wish I could go at the speed he does on his bike. I congratulate both of them on their persistence in promoting safety on the roads for cyclists.