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CUTTING ROAD DEATHS IS CHEAP - BUT WE CAN'T DO IT, SAY COUNCILS

A survey of accident prevention experts at councils across the UK has revealed that nearly all believe they could save many lives a year on the roads for less than £100,000 a time - but most haven't got either the skilled staff to do it or the money.

The figure is in stark contrast to the £10 million each currently earmarked to save lives on the railways, and the £1.2 million cost that the government says society bears for every road death, an AA road safety conference will be told on Monday (25 November).

Low-cost road safety schemes - such as putting barriers around solid objects at the roadside, better junction lighting and anti-skid road surfaces - are a proven method of cutting deaths and injuries.

But the survey of 27 councils, carried out jointly between the County Surveyors' Society and the AA Foundation for Road Safety Research, shows that many accident prevention engineers are held back from doing more by a skills shortage and a lack of cash in the right areas. Nearly half of those questioned put the cost of measures per life saved at less than £50,000.

Both the CSS and AA are now demanding urgent action to tackle the skills shortage and identify new ways of funding this work within local authorities.

The study results will be presented to the conference on Monday, where experts from across Europe will discuss progress with the AA-led European Road Assessment Programme (EuroRAP). The project is developing a Europe-wide system to identify killer roads, which will allow engineers to target engineering improvements to reduce the 40,000 deaths across Europe each year.

John Dawson, the AA's policy director, says: "It is totally unacceptable that we are seeing people die or suffer serious injuries every year on UK roads for want of these relatively tiny sums of money, and a lack of trained people. Too many serious road accidents are an avoidable drain on the health service.

"Railway safety is important, but we mustn't hold life dear on rail and cheap on the roads. The government has set an important target to reduce deaths and serious injuries by 40 per cent by 2010. Hundreds of lives can be saved every year with cheap, simple and straightforward accident remedial measures. The behaviour of drivers, the safety of

the cars they drive and the safe design of the roads they use have all got a vital role to play in bringing down the death toll.”

Two-thirds of the CSS members polled said that although they have a budget to recruit skilled staff, they couldn't find enough trained people. A quarter didn't have enough budget to recruit at all.

John Dawson says: “In one way, the UK is lucky in that the know-how exists, and most local authorities have already invested in the computer systems to pin down where accidents of all types happen.

“But it is crazy that we don't invest enough in the training of safety engineers, and daft economics not to invest in schemes that pay back their costs twenty times over. We just seem to accept the unnecessary pain, grief and suffering that these accidents bring.”

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