

Let's Talk Fleet Risk

Stuart Lovatt – Chair, TyreSafe

Simon: Welcome to Let's talk fleet risk – a podcast for those who manage drivers and vehicles and want to reduce road risk in their organisation.

I'm Simon Turner, Campaign Manager for Driving for Better Business, and in this episode I'm talking to Stuart Lovatt, Chair of the road safety charity, TyreSafe.

In a wide-ranging chat, we discussed:

- The number of tyre-related incidents and their consequences.
- The results of this year's survey looking at the legality of tyres at the point of replacement.
- The specific tyre safety issues businesses need to look for each vehicle type including trucks, vans, company cars and grey fleets.
- We talk about specific emerging issues around tyre safety for electric vehicles.
- The impact of poor tyre-management on the bottom line
- This year's Tyre Safety Month campaign and free resources you can share with your drivers.

Hello everyone and welcome to Let's Talk Fleet Risk. As October is Tyre Safety Month, I've invited Stuart Lovatt, Chair of the Road Safety Charity TyreSafe to be my guest on this special episode. Welcome to the podcast Stuart.

Stuart, we've known each other many years from your previous role as Strategic Road Safety Lead at National Highways where, among many other things, you had overall responsibility for the Driving for Better Business Programme.

Q1: Tyre Safety is increasingly important for fleets for a number of very important reasons that we'll get to later in the discussion – important for both safety and cost.

But first, tell us what TyreSafe is, and does?

Stuart: Thanks Simon. I retired last year from National Highways, and I've worked with TyreSafe since 2006 because tyre safety is crucial in helping to reduce collisions and incidents, so as a keen supporter I'm pleased to pick this up.

The tyre industry in 2006 came together in 2006 to realise there was a corporate and social responsibility to reduce the heavy number of incidents. In 2016, we received charitable status – a registered road safety charity – and the main aim is to raise awareness, to help reduce the number of collisions and the number of people killed and seriously injured where tyres are a causation factor. That's our primary aim. We are a campaigning organisation, and predominately we are here to get that message out and work with partners to reduce what I think is an absolutely avoidable number

of incidents. One thing that I must say is that we do not lobby government or ask for changes – just like DfBB we are here to promote the legislation of the day. We do engage with government, but we are here to help raise awareness of the existing rules and legislation. We're here to promote the legal, the moral as well as the financial argument – we're trying to talk about the impact, as well as the cost and the inconvenience, and of course the moral argument about getting it right.

Simon: There are some pretty eye-opening statistics on your website such as:

- Over 150 people killed or seriously injured each year in defective tyre-related accidents.
- 4,596 casualties from tyre-related incidents in the last five years...

And a really big number...

- 2,200,000 MOT failures each year due to tyre defects – according to the DVSA

This are big numbers, and the amount of MOT failures should be a big red flag for businesses. Can you explain to us why tyre safety is so important in the overall road safety picture?

Stuart: We only use official statistics – Dept of Transport, DVSA figures or academic research which can be independently verified. As you say, we're talking about some pretty big numbers there. What we are trying to get across is how Tyre Safety fits in the overall Safe System.

From my perspective and I've been involved in road safety for over 20 years now, the whole point of the Safe System is accepting that people make mistakes, whether you're a fleet manager or a business owner, or a member of the public. People make mistakes, organisations make mistakes – but that should not have to lead to death and serious injury.

You've got the figures – 150 people killed or seriously injured a year – that is a huge under-reporting of what is actually going on – but even so, on the website we talk about 153 people according to the Stats 19 Police Figure – but when you compare that to say the 144 people that have been recorded on mobile phone usage – tyres are recorded even more so as being a contributory factor to that collision – and yet there's so much being done in raising awareness of the distraction and the risk of more serious injury (KSIs). The penalty points have been doubled, the fines have been doubled, we now have greater police awareness and the courts time in trying to address this.

For me, tyres are a hidden killer, if you like – they're certainly a hidden problem, and what I am trying to do with TyreSafe is raise awareness of these very very big numbers.

You mention 2.2 million MOT Failures – and that's DVSA's own figures. Those same technicians in the garages determined that in 1.1 million of those – over 50% - there was a serious tyre issue. I believe there's an awful lot more needs to be done. The other thing when we talk about Stats 19 police figures is that police only record tyres as a contributory factor in about 2% of cases – most of the time, 75-80% of the time

they just class it as driver / rider error. For example – ‘failed to look’ – a third of incidents on the strategic road network are rear end shunts according to National Highways – but is it because your driver of a fleet vehicle wasn’t paying attention, didn’t see - or was it down to a mechanical failure where the system couldn’t operate so the autonomous braking that you may have purchased on your fleet vehicles or the lane keep assist for example – has failed because the tyres weren’t able to react as the manufacturers intended them to. I really believe it’s the tip of the iceberg and we want to turn a spotlight on the scale of this problem so we can extrapolate from better data on what I think is a hidden problem.

Simon: You also do your own research and at this year’s TyreSafe briefing you announced the results of the national tread depth survey at the point of replacement. Tell us what you found?

Stuart: This was huge piece of research and evaluation in 2016 – it was a point of replacement study working with the TyreSafe supporters Group and the garages. We were looking at tyres being replaced when somebody has made that decision – ‘I think I need a new tyre for this vehicle – and we looked at 330,000 tyres so it was a very large sample.

27% of those tyres were already illegal. Since we did that research we’ve had the impact of a continuing cost of living crisis, we’ve had COVID and all the vehicle downtime that caused, so as I came out of National Highways, we thought it would be a good idea to re-do this research and we did it even bigger.

We had 428 service centres right across Britain reporting back on data. This time we looked at 549,000 tyres. One thing I’m pleased to report is that the number of tyres replaced that were illegal was down to 17% so we’re hoping the campaigns we’re running are starting to have some input. But – when you think that 17% of vehicles had been driven there on illegal tyres, and that’s just those who have made the decision to change them – the sheer number of people who are driving on personal or business time, when you think about the number of illegal tyres, it’s huge.

We brought in Imperial College London to do this independent academic study – and what these numbers equate to is something like 6.1million tyres are on the roads illegally if you scale that up. I believe this is one of the main reasons there are so many incidents and that includes damage only incidents on our roads today – people driving around with a safety critical component on their vehicle that they don’t even realise is not working as effectively as it should do and also is illegal - which could result in significant consequences for them as the driver or the owner of the vehicle.

Simon: That’s still a staggering percentage – even though you would hope that the work you are doing is having an effect that is still an awful lot.

Simon: There are a number of tyre safety-related resources on the Driving for Better Business website. Go to [driving for better business dot com](https://drivingforbetterbusiness.com), click [Resources at the top](#), and search for ‘tyre’ or click the link in the show notes.

FLEET RELATED TYRE SAFETY

Simon: Let's now talk about tyre safety as it relates to businesses with staff who drive for work. Some of the key groups include professional drivers in HGVs, delivery drivers and engineers, etc in vans, we've got company car drivers and we've got staff using their own cars for work journeys.

I've a separate question for you on each of these, including one about an important issue that's really only just coming to light.

Let's start with HGVs. I'm sure many of us have seen videos of truck tyres blowing out at high speed on the motorway and the potential that has for extremely serious incidents involving multiple vehicles. You've carried out research with Bridgestone into the debris from some of these incidents to determine the causes – what did you find? Did it highlight anything interesting?

Stuart: One of the key things is that it's probably down to under-inflation or wear on the tyre – not in tread depth, but very often the side walls were cracking, and they perish – the longer you have them – due to weather factors etc as they harden. As these tyres are driven on, they heat up – that constant wear and the under inflation that heat that ultimately will lead to the tyre giving way.

That's why there are so many instances. That's why we see a lot of tyre debris and vehicle fires because the tyres can end up igniting – and the cab itself can itself to burst into flames which as you can imagine can shut the entire road network and leads to congestion.

When we look at the national intelligence tool used by National Highways there were 9035 tyre related incidents on commercial vehicles. Over 9000 incidents and many of those resulted in tyre debris – over 1000 – tyre debris detected just on the motorway where they have this data. If you look at the information from National Highways there are 46,000 tyre incidents on average every year. Many of those incidents would have been dealt with without National Highways being aware or traffic officers attending, but that incidence will be higher when you're talking about vans or cars or bikes – smaller vehicles – particularly where people are driving on grey fleet. It's not just about private usage - it's about company usage as well. I am firmly of the opinion that these are predominantly avoidable. There's always going to be random incidents – debris burst the tyre for example – but most of this is down to not undertaking journey checks, setting up before you go, inspecting your vehicles before you drive. Most of these can be avoided by simple care and maintenance which can mitigate the huge risk and consequences of these kind of failures.

Simon: Tell me about what good practice would be for that kind of maintenance – you talked about tyre walls cracking and perishing – vehicle checks have to go further than checking tyre tread haven't they?

Stuart: Yes – particularly with commercial vans we know that tread depth is not the issue – it's under or over inflation which then can result in these potential

consequences. Also people who have got old tyres they may well do the due diligence and check the tread depth, but then fail to realise the other problems . It's difficult to see if a tyre is over or under inflated by just doing a visual check. You need to be able to check it using a proper gauge for pressures. You can actually see if a tyre looks aged or is perishing. I'll give you an example – we were at an event in Preston a few weeks ago and someone asked us to look at a tyre and the tyre was fine – tread depth was fine – but you could see huge holes and the tyre was 15 years old. The tread was still okay but the tyre would probably have given away if it had been driven for much longer – and they're unaware because the holes were on the inside of the tyre.

So, a quick visual inspection in that circumstance had failed that owner of that vehicle and could have led to serious consequences.

Simon: Let's look at vans. We're getting close to 5 million vans on Britain's roads now, being used for a variety of jobs from multi-drop deliveries to service engineer visits to carrying tools and workers between construction sites. We've got similar tyres being used on different sized vans, with huge variations in load weight, often through a single day, including many that are found by the DVSA to be heavily over-loaded, and you've got varied weather conditions as well. What do you see as the key tyre safety issues for van operators.

Stuart: It's similar to any other category. If you're using this vehicle every day as a key tool of your business, you need to be checking with a walk around check every day. Dfbb & HSE guidance – tyres are not different to checking your load. Particularly for vans under-inflation is probably one of the biggest issues. You have a quick check and see the tread depth looks okay – you might even do the 20p check which you can see on our website – so I think it's under inflation. You yourself Simon have experienced that at the demonstration day at the test track. You're in a van that's driven with under inflated tyres and even under 30 mph with traction control on you're starting to lose the handling of that vehicle around 30 mph.

It can be quite scary – tyre safety month is in October for a reason. It's the wettest month of the year. Just today we're having sunshine followed by heavy showers which causes surface water. Under inflation will significantly affect the handling system of your vehicle

It will compromise your autonomous braking systems – it will compromise the ability of your vehicle to be able to react. We know that tread is there to dispel the water to enable the vehicle to avoid aquaplaning – it doesn't take much water to lift that tyre up. If we are talking about a brand-new tyre, with 6 to 7 mm on your van, then that will fill a bucket of water about every 7 seconds. As you get that down to the legal minimum of 1.6mm you can imagine that is going to take many more seconds to fill that bucket and dispel that water. The chance of the vehicle losing its grip on the road and Aquaplaning and losing control has increased – which can lead to significant incidents.

Simon: That demonstration was a really good illustration of that – feeling how the van was behaving driving inside with your professional driver, and also standing outside with a pedestrian side view of what was going on with that van. It was a clear demonstration of what can happen.

Stuart: Just before we move on we hired that van for the day from a local van rental agency and actually that van that was delivered to us – they knew it was for a road safety presentation – it was delivered to us with a defective tyre with a bolt in it. So clearly the company hadn't done their due diligence and provided us with a vehicle that was potentially dangerous. How many times had that vehicle been rented out in dangerous condition we don't know. It just emphasises why we want you to ACT on your tyres – it's air, its condition and its tread. In this example it was damage – if you're doing many drops in the day, tyres are one of the few things within seconds of setting off on a journey, they can be affected – a pothole for instance. So one of the things we are asking today is for people to ACT on their tyres – check Air, Condition, Tread.

Simon: And the van was almost new – there's a danger of being complacent for anyone with a new or nearly new vehicle you assume the tyres are going to be good for 10, 20, 30,000 miles – but as you said you could damage a tyre within 30 secs of setting off.

Stuart: Going back to the MOT – for the first 7 years of a vehicle's life tyres are the primary reason that a vehicle will fail it's MOT – other consumables such as brakes, suspension will start to fail as the vehicle gets older, but just because the vehicle is new it doesn't mean you shouldn't check your tyres.

We put a strong case to the DoT not to move the MOT system from every 3 years to 4 years because these (tyres) are a consumable – tyres are a product designed to wear down. We support what DfBB is doing in emphasising the importance of daily checks as every journey could result in something that might compromise the handling and the safety aspects of your vehicle.

Simon: This concludes part 1 of a 2-part podcast for Tyre Safety Month.

In part 2 we'll discuss the tyre safety concerns around company cars and grey fleet, including the emerging tyre safety issue for electric vehicles, and discuss the key messages and resources that are part of this October's Tyre Safety Month campaign.

You can find more information on Tyre Safety Month at tyresafe.org

Along with a recording of this year's TyreSafe briefing. You could also consider becoming a supporter of TyreSafe to help them continue their excellent research and campaigning activities.
