

# CSI: UK

Some 350 road traffic accidents involving injuries were reported every day in 2017, according to public data quoted by Alex Livadeas, TRL (Transport Research Laboratory) accident reconstruction consultant, in a June 2019 webinar on fleet safety put on by road safety charity brake ([www.is.gd/uhefeb](http://www.is.gd/uhefeb)).

Those incidents involving the damage to property and injuries will be investigated by the local police. The more serious the incident, the greater the extent of the investigation, according to senior accident reconstruction consultant Victoria Evers at TRL. She is one of a team of 12 consultants working as expert witnesses at the organisation. They contribute to some 600 cases a year, made up of criminal and civil court cases, as well as coroner investigations.

Life-changing injuries or fatalities would see the greatest investigation deployment, and include taking witness statements, scene recordings carried out by specialist collision investigators, and vehicle assessments. "With vehicles, we are looking at damage and what it tells us, and if mechanical defects could have contributed," observes Evers, who

**Like the setting of the popular television show, investigations of road traffic accidents by a new UK body is looking more likely thanks to research commissioned by the RAC Foundation, finds Will Dalrymple**

previously worked as a Metropolitan Police accident investigator. She adds that DVSA is often involved in investigations where commercial vehicles are involved, given its pool of vehicle assessors employed for annual tests. [DVSA was approached for this article]. Other organisations might be involved if the investigators wish to obtain data from an onboard event data recorder or telematics black box, she adds.

Back in the webinar, Livadeas pointed out that the road safety charity considers the common descriptor 'accident' as inaccurate, since these incidents are not chance events, but preventable. Part of preventing them involves investigation, he says.

Is it possible that the combined lessons of these million accidents every year are being lost, because no-one is taking a wider view? Arguing in favour of such a position is Steve Gooding, director of the RAC Foundation. "Our emerging conclusions really bring out the fact that there is information there; there is knowledge to be gained from

a more systematic review of the more detailed data harvested currently by the police than is currently happening, and we can find out things that we might be able to act on," he observes.

## THE STARTING POINT

Three years ago, the charitable wing of the organisation primarily known as an automobile recovery service published a report entitled 'Toward A Road Accident Investigation Branch.' Gooding described it as posing the question of not 'should there be one' but rather, if the government was interested in establishing one, where would it start.

Usually, it's a tragic accident. That was what sparked the establishment of each of the three existing Accident Investigation Branches: Air (1915, after the 1912 Flanders Monoplane crash, two fatalities); Marine (1989, after the 1987 sinking of Herald of Free Enterprise, 193 fatalities); Rail (2005, after the 1999 Ladbroke Grove train crash, 31 fatalities).

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Steve Gooding

organisations all have in common is statutory protection, according to Gooding. He says: “Their investigations are independent of the police and what they gather does not have to be disclosed to the police. The people that we’ve spoken to in those branches have said that this is a critical part of the framework.” However, providing a road branch with such power would require new legislation.

So that’s one of the reasons why RAC Foundation and others, commissioned by the government, have been researching the topic. Its director frames the research question in this way: “We all know that the number of fatalities on the roads from people involved in road collisions has plateaued in this country over the last few years. If we are going to get the numbers to continue to fall, there’s a choice. Some of us would say that we need to redouble our efforts in what we’re already doing – focus hard on the fatal five: clamp down on drink driving, drug driving, speeding, and all of those things.

“I think we would say, that’s one approach. The other is to see what is it that we are not doing; what is it that we are we missing? Are there factors in here that result in drivers making the decisions that they do, and could we do better to forestall them? I’m hopeful that we will find things that could be done, and the probability is that we will come out with a positive business case.”

Because that has been the organisation’s goal with the research, he explains; it’s easy to create a list of potential actions, but in the real world where police budgets are stretched as it is, “we also need to apply a lens of critical reality to it.” The final report – with just those sort of conclusions – is due to be published in summer 2022.

One project involves looking for causal patterns in closed road collision cases at three volunteer police forces:



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Humberstone, West Midlands, and Dorset, Devon and Cornwall. Adds Gooding: “The advantage of that is that they are police employees, so they don’t have the data protection issues that we would have had; we haven’t seen the data, we don’t have access to that; we don’t see the personal details or the names. What we see is their analysis of things that happened, and questions that therefore come into their mind.”

### PROJECTS

Another project is to devise a way to prioritise the cases under investigation; how to decide which incidents should be investigated, given that there are too many to study them all.

Also, in 2020, Highways England also approached RAC Foundation with funding to investigate the true cost of a collision involving a truck on a motorway. These are especially expensive because, as Gooding points out, big trucks have big diesel tanks; collisions often involve diesel spillage; and when diesel spills on the road, it has to be resurfaced, which takes it out of use for quite a long time.

A key piece of the Foundation’s

effort to make a cost-effective case for an investigation body is knowing how to quantify the benefits of safety improvements. If tightening speed limits reduces accidents in an area by 50 per year, how valuable is that in monetary terms? In fact, the Foundation is planning to commission research on this very point.

Without prejudicing its conclusions, Steve Gooding suggests that one way that problem might be solved is by turning it on its head: “If you say it costs £5m a year to run a branch – plucking a number out of the air – how successful would it have to be to cover that cost? The brutal fact is, you don’t have to save that many lives, you don’t have to save that much traffic disruption from spilled diesel on a carriageway, to come out with a positive economic case.

“The trick is that a positive economic case isn’t the same as a positive financial case. We’ll be talking about a cost to the transport department, with a benefit to the health and social services departments. It’s only in the treasury where that calculation nets off. We’ll have to see how everyone reacts to that, but that’s how we’re thinking about the two sides of the equation.” 