
Speed-curbed cars launched in Government trial

New in-car technology which forces motorists to obey the speed limit will be unveiled in a major Government-backed trial to be announced on Monday.

By David Williams

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More than 20 vehicles will be fitted with computers that 'know' the maximum permitted speed on any given stretch of road.

When the vehicle reaches the limit, sophisticated electronics – linked to an on-board digital map and satellites – cut in to prevent the engine going any faster.

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The 'Intelligent Speed Adaptation' (ISA) system is seen as the 'holy grail' by road safety campaigners.

But it has alarmed motoring campaigners who say the device – which could add around £500 to the cost of a car when it goes into production – is further evidence of state interference. They say it undermines motorists' freedom and

claim it could hinder, rather than aid, road safety.

The trial is the largest ISA experiment ever conducted and it is seen as a blueprint for a UK roll-out. It is being carried out by Transport for London (TfL) which runs buses, trains, the Underground and major roads in the capital.

TfL – which reports to Boris Johnson, the London mayor – says the specially-equipped fleet including cars, a bus and a black cab, will take to the streets this summer to evaluate the technology's impact on road safety and congestion, in a six-month trial which will be watched eagerly by the Government.

The aim of is to develop the cutting-edge technology for the marketplace. TfL is looking for a commercial firm to take the idea forward.

TfL experts claim that forcing motorists to stick to speed limits would cut the number of accidents by around 10 per cent.

At the heart of the computer is a highly-detailed digital map programmed with the speed limits on every road within the M25, right down to 20mph residential zones. Data is displayed to the driver on a satnav-style monitor.

Already in use on three prototype trial cars, the system offers the driver two modes, Voluntary and Advisory, as well as an override button to switch it off altogether. However, if the scheme is expanded and developed commercially in the future, the element of choice could be reduced.

In Advisory mode the screen shows the speed limit – and a smiley 'face' if the driver sticks to it. The face frowns if the motorist goes too fast.

It is the 'Voluntary' mode, however, that motoring campaign groups fear – and that safety campaigners hope will one day become mandatory across Britain.

When ISA-equipped vehicles in the pilot scheme reach the speed limit the accelerator is prevented from speeding up the car. No matter how far it is depressed by the driver there is no further response. The system does not affect the brakes.

If an ISA-equipped car is driven from a 40mph to a 30mph or 20mph zone it is

automatically and gradually slowed down.

The system makes it almost impossible for the driver to get a speeding ticket from a camera.

The digital map took two years to complete at a cost of £220,000. The Government is set to order a nationwide map that will cover every inch of Britain, paving the way for a countrywide scheme.

"This innovative technology could help any driver avoid the unnecessary penalties of creeping over the speed limit and at the same time will save lives," said Chris Lines, head of TfL's Road Safety Unit.

He said the system would counter the "accelerate-brake tendency" among drivers, and added: "We may well see additional benefits including reduced congestion as a result of fewer collisions."

However the AA warned there would be opposition. Andrew Howard, the AA's head of road safety, said: "Drivers are divided in their views of ISA; some hate it, some want it. Many have questions that will be answered only by trials like those being carried out by TfL."

Paul Biggs, of the Association of British Drivers, said: "The problem is that speed limits are often unrealistic and slow traffic unnecessarily.

"At other times, this system could encourage motorists to travel right up to the speed limit when it is not safe to do so. It will stop drivers thinking."

However, one major local authority – Southwark Council in London – says it wants to order 300 ISA units for its own fleet, in a move expected to be copied by other authorities.

The ISA trial units cost £400,000 to develop. They were made by the British division of Technolution, a Dutch firm, with funding from TfL.

A previous small-scale study by Leeds University estimated that an 'advisory' ISA scheme would reduce collisions by 10 per cent.

The Commission for Integrated Transport, which advises the government, said that if two-thirds of cars were fitted with ISA, almost all traffic would be slowed

because non-ISA cars would end up stuck behind speed-restricted cars.

TFL will reveal its findings in a report next year.

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