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4x4s / SUVs – the facts

The motor industry takes its responsibility to produce safe, environmentally friendly products seriously. SMMT has therefore become concerned about comments made by those who campaign against the modern 4x4 / SUV vehicle – and its driver. More often than not, their views are based on unhelpful stereotypes and inaccurate statistics, rather than an understanding of the full range of vehicles available in the UK, their uses and their capabilities.

In response, SMMT presents these important points.

The market in London

Some have suggested that one in five new models sold in London is a 4x4 / SUV. This is wholly inaccurate. In 2004, new registrations of 4x4 / SUV vehicles in London totalled 12,731 units - 6.29 per cent of the capital's total new car market. That's around **one in fourteen**.

Across the UK, 179,439 4x4s / SUVs were newly registered in 2004. Of these, 7.1 per cent were registered to owners in London. In total there are approximately 2.8 million cars of all ages in London. Just 3.5 per cent are 4x4s SUVs.

Environmental performance

New car carbon dioxide emissions – among other tailpipe emissions - are falling year-on-year, in every segment of the market, from superminis to luxury cars. In the 4x4 / SUV segment, average CO₂ emissions have fallen by 14.6 per cent in the last six years alone. That's better than the average ten per cent drop across all segments of the new car market.

Average emissions of CO₂ from 4x4s / SUVs are more than 12 per cent lower than the average luxury saloon car and are on a par with figures for executive and sports cars.

Most sales in the 4x4 / SUV segment are of diesel variants. These have better fuel consumption and emit less CO₂ than petrol models. Manufacturers like Lexus and Ford are also working to bring alternative fuel models to market. The Lexus RX400h, launched in the UK this June, and models like the Ford Escape Hybrid are petrol/electricity 4x4s / SUVs that boast equivalent fuel consumption and CO₂ emissions to those of a standard saloon.

All vehicles, in all market segments, are subject to stringent European emissions legislation. The Euro III emission standard has been mandatory since 2001 and the Euro IV standard is mandatory from 2006. Many models, including versions of the Volkswagen Touareg and Toyota Rav 4 already meet the Euro IV standards, demonstrating the desire of the sector to have the latest engine technology in use ahead of any legislative requirements.

Advertising and promotion

The way any product is promoted is subject to scrutiny by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), the Office of Communications (OfCom) and preceding that the Independent Television Commission (ITC). They operate strict codes of practice relating to print and broadcast media to which the automotive industry is bound.

Since 1999, the ASA has investigated an average of 13,000 complaints per year. Only 24 of those each year have been related to the motor industry. Since 1999, only seven complaints have concerned the depiction of 4x4 / SUV vehicles. Three were upheld. One related to a warranty issue, another concerned towing capabilities and a third referred to an environmental comparison claim.

In the same five year period, from a total of 30,000 complaints, just 17 television adverts featuring vehicles were referred to the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and Ofcom. None featured a 4x4 / SUV.

Responsible Use

Manufacturers run 4x4 / SUV training days for both dealership staff and customers. This ensures that dealers are fully aware of all the safety features and capabilities of the vehicles when discussing them with customers. Mitsubishi, for example, also

supplement this with a driving skills section on their website. Land Rover has a network of Experience Centres around the country.

Running for over seven years, the Mercedes-Benz M-Class Experience offers every new M-Class customer the chance to achieve the highest standards of driving through a free off-road driving day at 12 sites across the UK.

Urban congestion

Consumers should choose a vehicle that best suits their needs. However, all drivers must be responsible for how they use their vehicle in urban areas, as well as on rural roads. Double-parking of any type of car creates unnecessary congestion and road safety hazards.

However, while often taller than other models, some of the most popular 4x4s are in fact narrower and shorter than the average saloon car. The Toyota Rav 4, for example, is nearly a metre (80.5cm) shorter than the Toyota Avensis. The BMW X3 is 27.6 cm shorter than a BMW 5 Series and 7cm narrower than the MINI. The Nissan X-Trail is 11.2 cm shorter than the Primera.

Each of the three best selling 4x4s on the market, the Freelander, Rav 4 and CR-V, is shorter than a Mondeo or a Vectra.

Many new 4x4s / SUVs also feature a seven seat configuration rather than five in a standard saloon or estate car. Parents should be encouraged to coordinate their journeys, where practical and using their capabilities, the number of vehicles on the 'school run' could actually be cut by the 4x4 / SUV. Research by Volvo shows that 71 per cent of owners regularly use the third row of seats in the XC90 model. Land Rover research found that 53 per cent regularly carry three or more children in the back.

Safety

The safety of occupants and pedestrians is of the highest priority for automotive manufacturers. The industry has recognised the concerns that have been raised and is making the necessary investments and improvements in vehicle design.

There have been reports that a pedestrian is 27 times more likely to be killed when hit by a 4x4 / SUV compared to being struck by any other vehicle. The statistic is wrong.

An American report was published in 1998 but was not related to pedestrian impacts. It highlighted concerns relating to vehicle-to-vehicle side impact collisions of commercial vehicles, which in the US, includes some sports utility vehicles. 4x4 / SUVs sold in the UK are far smaller than American models and, in the last few years, massive investment has been made in improving front end design and side impact protection.

Any impact with a moving object is likely to cause injury to a pedestrian. However, increasingly 4x4s / SUVs are scoring highly on pedestrian protection measures in independent EuroNCAP crash tests. The Nissan X-Trail and the Volvo XC90 both scored two stars in recent NCAP tests, while the Honda CR-V, the third best selling 4x4 in Britain, achieved an impressive three star rating.

There are many examples of models in other segments which perform less well than current 4x4 / SUV models. Clearly this is an issue of individual product design and not a reflection on an 'unsafe' vehicle type. The industry has recognised this and is working on the design of all vehicles types to minimise the impact of any collision.

Accident prevention cannot be reflected in statistics but nevertheless this is an important factor in the safety of modern 4x4 / SUV vehicle design. For example stability control systems are increasingly fitted as standard on 4x4 models, such as on the Volkswagen Touareg, Volvo XC90, BMW X5 and Mercedes M Class. Anti-rollover technologies are also common, fitted to models like the new Land Rover Discovery III. Such 'active safety systems' are designed to prevent an accident occurring in the first place. Unfortunately an accident prevented is never reflected in statistics but it should be included in media reports.

A 4x4 capability makes a vehicle more stable in adverse weather conditions – on and off road. Ask yourself what type of vehicle you would rather have found yourself in on the M11 during the snow storms in the winter of 2004. Equally, the command driving position and better visibility from which 4x4s / SUVs benefit also makes an accident less likely. Drivers are better able to see pedestrians, motorcycles and other vulnerable road users. Visibility is also being improved through the fitment of new blind spot cameras which can identify moving objects in unseen areas and alert the driver to potential dangers.

Vehicle theft

According to figures in the National Audit Office *Reducing Vehicle Crime* report published on 28 January 2005, 4x4s / SUVs and people carriers are the least likely types of cars to be stolen. In fact, they are half as likely to be taken by thieves as small saloons, mini and supermini models. Of every 1,000 small saloons on the road, 13 were stolen in 2003 compared to 12 for mini and supermini cars. The equivalent figure for 4x4 / SUVs and people carriers is just six.

Terminology

For some detractors the term 4x4 seems to be synonymous with 'big and bulky'. But the reality is that many standard saloon cars feature a 4x4 capability, for example the Skoda Octavia 4x4, Fiat Panda 4x4 and Subaru Impreza.

The term 4x4 relates to driven axles. Most engines drive a single axle, usually the front but some cars feature 'rear wheel drive'. A 4x4 is simply a vehicle with the capability to balance the distribution of torque, sending more power to the front or back axle, helping prevent loss of traction caused by over or understeer.

The stereotype is that all 4x4s are bulky and polluting. However, the diversity of models with a 4x4 capacity in terms of size and environmental performance etc, demonstrates the folly of attaching this type of label and using it to justify calls for a punitive tax regime or restriction on their use in certain environments.

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