

Still a mess

The continuing failure of UK measurement policy

Government policy on metrication has failed. This is because it is based on the false assumption that, as children receive some metric education in maths lessons at school, they will grow up using metric units. Therefore (so it is assumed) as the population ages, acceptance and adoption of metric units will grow until eventually the metric system will be the default system for all purposes.

Unfortunately, experience has not borne out this assumption.

Based on this false assumption, and having achieved partial metrication in most fields of activity, successive governments have given up on trying to complete the conversion of the UK to primary use of metric units. No further action is planned.

The UK Metric Association (UKMA) therefore commissioned YouGov to carry out a survey of public understanding and use of metric and imperial units and of public support for completing the metric changeover. A follow-up survey also examined the salience of metrication as a political issue. Key results were as follows:

- Half of respondents were opposed to completing metrication, with a quarter supportive and a fifth indifferent or noncommittal.
- Although younger generations were more supportive than the older, still 36% of the 18-24 age group were opposed.
- Where there are specific practical reasons for using metric units, the majority of the population prefer to use them
- However, where parental, peer and media pressures are strongly in favour of imperial units, all age groups continue to use imperial - including for personal weighing
- Although there was a definite association between age and acceptance/use of metric units, there was still either a majority or a large minority of younger people who habitually use imperial rather than metric units for various everyday functions
- Thus the basic assumption that underlies Government policy - that metric education in school will lead naturally to a general acceptance of metric units for all purposes - is shown to be incorrect.

It is concluded that, without Government action to complete metrication, the present dysfunctional muddle of two incompatible measurement systems - the "very British mess" - will continue indefinitely.

So why does this "mess" matter?

The "mess" matters for several reasons:

- To function effectively, an adult in Britain needs to have a detailed knowledge of **two** measurement systems. Yet the YouGov survey showed that:
 - 76% of respondents were unable to answer correctly how many yards there are in a mile
 - 43% could not say how many metres there are in a kilometre
 - 32% of respondents were unable to answer correctly how many pounds there are in a stone
 - 39% did not give the correct answer when asked how many grams there are in a kilogram
 - These findings suggest that **many adults in Britain are unable to understand or make use of the key information that is provided for their protection or benefit .**
- Incompatible units make comparison difficult - undermining consumer protection
- Mutual incomprehension - people who use different systems don't understand each other
- Constant need to convert - prone to errors
- Accidents - such as the airliner that ran out of fuel as a result of wrong conversion
- Costs - of mistakes, and of running two systems
- Failure to reap the benefits of past investment in metrication - esp in education
- Foreign perception of the UK as insular and living in the imperial past

Politicians of all parties need to recognise that:

- the policies of successive governments over the past 40 years have failed, and
- Government action is needed to resolve the problem

Specific action includes:

- Declaration that completing metrication remains the Government's objective
- Duty on public sector bodies to use metric units
- Requirement to use metric units in advertising and product description
- Conversion of road signs and speed limits
- Better enforcement of existing rules

Contrary to the common assumption that metrication is a vote loser, the **survey evidence** shows that such a programme of action would be **very unlikely** to cost a party votes in the context of a general election or **to make any difference to the result.**