



UKMA news

UK Metric Association

The newsletter of the organisation campaigning for
a **single rational** system of measurement

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IRELAND SHOWS THE WAY WITH METRIC SPEED LIMITS

by Robin Paice, Chairman, UKMA

[UKMA Chairman, Robin Paice, visited Dublin from 18 - 21 January to observe the Irish changeover to metric speed limits and signage. This is a summary of his report. The full version can be found on the Smartgroups archive file (your password is required) at <http://www.smartgroups.com/vault/metric/>]



Example of a new 80 km/h sign on an exit from a National route to a local road

The purpose of my visit was to gather information that would assist UKMA in its campaign to persuade the British Government to adopt metric road signage.

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“DAMP SQUIB” IN ESSEX

by Robin Paice, Chairman, UKMA

Opponents of the metric system failed miserably in their attempt to stage a stunt in Hornchurch, Essex (East London) on 6 January. The “imperial vigilante”, Tony Bennett, who was convicted in 2002 of criminal damage to a metric road sign, appears to have split off from the so-called “British Weights and Measures Association” (BWMA) to found his “Customary Measures Society”. (Presumably, he has adopted this American terminology because he realises that the word “imperial” conveys a negative message to people for whom the British Empire is about as relevant as the Roman Empire).

In an effort to attract publicity Mr Bennett, who was formerly involved with the UK Independence Party, issued a press release and invited supporters to a pub in Hornchurch “in order to celebrate 1,827 successful days of resistance since Dave Stephens (a butcher) was sent an Infringement Notice by Southend Borough Council on 6 January (sic) 2000”. (This would have been for alleged offences under the Weights and Measures Acts). From other reports we have seen it appears that Southend Council discontinued its action because Mr Stephens (who is also reported to be a “Third Way” Parliamentary candidate) had sold his shop and moved to Hornchurch.

A *Google* search revealed no media hits for this world-shattering event, and it was assumed that, unaccountably, the media had overlooked it. However, a vigilant local member in Leigh-on-Sea spotted a 160-word report on p.13 of the well-known Billericay-

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IRELAND CHANGEOVER

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The Department for Transport (DfT) has acknowledged that the UK has a legal obligation to name a date for changing to kilometres [km] and kilometres per hour [km/h], but has argued that there is no time limit and that such a change would be confusing for older drivers who have had no metric education at school. UKMA has long believed that this is just a spurious excuse for avoiding the issue, and that metric education has little relevance to the changeover.

My visit confirmed that with good planning and public information, the change can easily be accomplished without any serious "confusion" or safety problems.

Ireland has been gradually changing its distance signage to km and metres for over 10 years (thus spreading the cost) and decided to review speed limits and change signage in 2004. In the event the legislation was delayed, so that the actual changeover was on 20 January 2005.

The method chosen was complete replacement of 35 000 old miles-per-hour [mph] signs (using existing posts) and installation of 23 000 completely new signs – e.g. where a national road [speed limit 100 km/h] joined a local rural road [80 km/h]. The option of using decals [stickers] was rejected as being a temporary measure, leading to a further replacement at increased cost. The new signs are distinctive, being larger, using a narrower font [to accommodate the third digit used in the 100 and 120 km/h signs] and all include the international, language-independent symbol "km/h".

I enjoyed the generous hospitality of several Irish Department of Transport officials, who gave me a lengthy briefing and a pack of materials and even drove me around the Dublin and Co. Wicklow areas. They were at pains to stress that the change was not simply about metrication: it was also about reviewing and changing the actual speed limits themselves. In particular the limit on rural, single carriageway roads (91% of the network) has been reduced from 60 mph to 80 km/h. There were therefore strong safety arguments for the change, which was supported by the National Safety Council and the AA.

In the Irish Republic the issue of metrication has not been politicised as it has in the UK. My impression was that people accepted the need for the change as part of the modernisation of the state. They wanted it to be done competently and to get it over with rather than argue about the principle. The fact that a large proportion of drivers had received no metric education at school was never mentioned as a factor influencing the changeover programme.

The key to a successful changeover was believed to be a very rapid conversion of the actual signs following a blitz of information and publicity in the two weeks preceding the change. Drivers were therefore left in no doubt as to what was happening and were warned that ignorance or confusion about the new limits would not be accepted by the police as an excuse for breaking the new limits. Examples of the publicity can be seen on a special website www.gometric.ie.

Perhaps the biggest issue was that most vehicle speedometers did not have easily legible km/h indications on the dial. It was decided that it was not practical to require speedometers to be "retrofitted" with new km/h dials, and the emphasis was therefore on familiarising drivers with the approximate conversions (e.g. 50 km/h = 31 mph). Every household received leaflets with conversion charts which could be kept in the car. All newly registered cars are required to be metric-only or metric-predominant.

New Limit	Approximate Equivalent	New Limit	Approximate Equivalent
30	19	80	50
50	31	100	62
60	37	120	75

These stickers were sent to every household in Ireland as part of the public-awareness campaign

The other main safety issue was the cross-border problem in the North (particularly where the border was not marked). This was tackled by placing new signs on each side of the border crossing, so that drivers would be aware that they were entering a different speed limit zone.

The cost was comparatively modest: €9 million for the signs (about €150 per sign), plus €2.5 million for the publicity campaign.

(The Republic's population is about 4 million - 1.5 million of whom live in Greater Dublin).

In the week before the changeover the weather forecast was for blizzard conditions, and the Irish DoT therefore authorised local authorities to commence installing the new signs in the previous week - with the result that the operation was completed ahead of schedule nearly everywhere.

The actual changeover on 20 January seems to have been almost a non-event. Everything went according to plan, and the predicted chaos and confusion did not occur. As one would expect, the media tried to portray it as a fiasco, but the best they could come up with was a 100 km/h sign outside a school (which was on a national road which the local authority had failed to review). Note that this "story" was not that metrication itself was a problem: rather, the local authority was accused of incompetence in not lowering the previous national speed limit of 60 mph on this stretch of road.

So what conclusions can we draw? The obvious lesson is that the conversion of speed limit signs to metric is no big deal. With proper planning and management, it can easily be accomplished at modest cost with no significant safety problems. In particular the DfT's stated reason for continually postponing metric conversion in the UK has been demonstrated to be specious and disingenuous. They have run out of excuses for not getting on with it.

VIEW FROM IRELAND

by Victor Fitzpatrick, member, UKMA

As an eight-year-old in 1983 on a school trip to Bangor in Northern Ireland I first became aware of the anomaly on Irish roads - the green signs gave distances in kilometres (km) but the speed limits were in miles per hour (mph). Over the years as the km signs spread across the country, I wondered if speed limits would ever be measured in km/h. In the mid-1990's I heard a snippet of a statement by the Minister for the Environment Noel Dempsey (who then had responsibility for transport) that speed limits would never go metric - "Ireland was a tiny market for car makers so until the UK went metric we'd stick with miles per hour", he said. I thought that was government policy until gradually people began questioning the excessive speeds that

motorists were driving at on our rural roads.

Finally in response to pressure to make speed limits lower and more sensible, the metrication of speed limits was put on the government's agenda by the new Transport Minister Seamus Brennan in early 2003. After a few false starts (June 1996, December 1998, 2002, September 2004, etc.) 20 January 2005 was eventually announced as "k-day". I wondered what the public reaction would be, and there was no reaction to measure! Nobody seemed to care about the end of miles-per-hour, however a few grasped what it meant - for the first time they'd have to pay attention to their speedometers. In early January the TV, radio, and newspaper adverts began to appear. They all strongly pushed the safety aspects of the switchover: lower speeds on rural roads and more sensible limits. This resulted in the change being viewed as a positive thing.

Many cars on Irish roads are 'grey imports' from Japan and have km/h-only speedometers. Most have dual mph-km/h speedometers, as in the UK, and a tiny amount of mainly classic cars are marked in mph only. In mid-2004 I popped into a BMW, Daewoo-Chrysler and Ford dealership. Each was offering to order km/h speedometers for 04 delivery as a €750 option but few customers took them up on the offer. All 05 cars are km/h-only despite the rumour that some would include small mph figures, albeit that the km/h scale would be predominant. I have just bought a new Volkswagen Lupo and was pleasantly surprised to see that the handbook, like the speedometer, was metric, with service intervals in kilometres - although this may also be the case for Volkswagen cars in the UK as miles are used in some sections, though in brackets.

I didn't expect to see any of the new signs until nearer 20 January, but on 11 January, I saw my first metric signs - it was quite strange to meet an 80 km/h sign, then suddenly for it to become 40 mph further along the road; then overnight the mph signs were gone. In fact, only once did I see a road crew in the process of removing the old mph signs. This situation rightly drew some fire from the press - the speed limits were still officially mph but the metric signs were the only ones on the roads, but on the whole the changeover was viewed positively by the media and the public at large.

I believe it is true to say that everyone coped

VIEW FROM IRELAND

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well and most complaints I heard revolved around frustration with car speedometers being predominantly mph. None of my peers are opposed to metrication. Despite the government's stated aim that metrication would bring consistency to our roads, most people associate the switchover with the EU. As the majority of people in Ireland view the EU positively, this isn't a problem; however, at the press launch I noticed that the Minister for Transport (now Martin Cullen), made no reference to Europe - he stressed consistency and safety as the reasons for metrication. The Fine Gael transport spokeswoman, Olivia Mitchell, was at the launch. Fine Gael is the main opposition party and very pro-Europe. She welcomed the switch to metric limits but complained that the campaign was too short and inadequate. To my knowledge all Irish political parties favour metrication, perhaps with the exception of Sinn Fein which is anti-Europe on the whole. Interestingly, its 5 TD's (MP's) are mainly based in border areas but were not very vocal in opposing the switchover, despite the obvious potential road safety risks.

I had to spend 20 January working, but kept an eye on the TV. It barely made the RTÉ 6 o'clock news - the most watched news broadcast on the island - being well relegated by George W. Bush's inauguration. No complaints, no fuss, and thankfully no road crashes. Now for most people it's a case of "What was all the fuss about?" or "Why all the millions spent on these leaflets?" and if that's all they have to complain about, speed limit metrication has been a resounding success!

DAMP SQUIB IN ESSEX

from page 1

based "Essex Enquirer". Predictably, it bore the headline "Butcher continues his fight against European Union rules" and included a photocall with a backdrop of the Union Flag.

UKMA Committee had decided in advance to ignore the stunt in the expectation that it would get no publicity (though we were ready to respond if necessary). Apart from the Essex Enquirer, this proved to be the case. At any rate it didn't compare with the free, unsolicited publicity which UKMA got from the Mail on Sunday in the same week!

BBC INCREASINGLY USING THE F-WORD

Many of our members have noted that the BBC's weather forecasters are increasingly giving temperature equivalents in Fahrenheit as well as in Celsius. This used to be the preserve of the summer season, or when the weather was unseasonably warm, but now it appears to be all year round—one forecast even being given as "Minus 10 Celsius—that's 14 Fahrenheit"! Several of our members have asked the BBC to stop giving the equivalent Fahrenheit temperatures, but have received the response that "not all our viewers and listeners understand Celsius".

Since BBC weather forecasts started using Celsius 40 years ago, it is hard to imagine there are people who really do not understand Celsius after all this time. We can only conclude that the BBC has been bombarded with demands from our imperialist opponents to hear Fahrenheit temperatures all year round, not just when it's warm. This minority of people who claim to not understand Celsius has led the BBC to believe there are viewers and listeners out there who genuinely cannot cope with Celsius.

We therefore urge as many members as possible to contact the BBC to tell them that you *do* understand Celsius and that you wish they would stop giving Fahrenheit translations.

Email: info@bbc.co.uk

Write to: BBC Complaints, PO Box 1922, Glasgow G2 3WT

Call: 08700 100222

“WHAT YOU CAN DO” PAGES ON WEBSITE



Recent additions to the UKMA Website include tips on writing to your MP. There are suggestions for outlining key issues to include in communications, or for those with little time, ready-made letter templates for you to use.

The pages can be found at:

http://www.ukma.org.uk/your_role/whatyoucando.htm#writetomp

Members with no internet access can call Roddy on 07771 813466, whereupon he will be happy to post letter-templates to you.

UKMA GIVEN EXTRA TIME TO RESPOND TO CONSULTATIONS

by Robin Paice, Chairman, UKMA

UKMA responds to consultations (1): The Food Orders

UKMA Committee members were incensed to learn on 29 January that the DTI had held a 12-week consultation on “Consolidating and simplifying the Food Orders” without inviting UKMA to comment. *Inter alia* these govern package sizes and mandatory quantities to be dispensed, especially in pubs. The closing date for the consultation, which opened on 12 October, was originally 4 January.

As the Government’s own Code of Practice on Consultation requires Departments to consult “widely” and to seek out potential consultees, and to allow a minimum of 12 weeks plus any holiday periods, the DTI appears to have breached the Code. Accordingly, I, as UKMA Chairman, telephoned and e-mailed the DTI asking for a further 4 weeks, and Lord Howe added his support. The DTI agreed to consider further representations, adding: “The issues covered by the consultation document do not include metrication. However, if your organisation has any comments to make on the issues covered these will of course be considered on their merits when received.”

Comment: It is quite amazing that civil servants appear not to realise that package sizes and mandatory quantities are relevant to metrication. It demonstrates how

Government operates in separate compartments who appear unable to see the wider picture.

UKMA responds to consultations (2): Setting local speed limits

Fortunately, this consultation paper was spotted by one of our members, who alerted the Committee. The closing date was 18 February, so we decided to wait until after the Irish changeover so that we could include any lessons learnt.

Our main line of argument was likely to be that, while particular local speeding problems should be addressed, this is not the right time for a general review of local speed limits. The DfT has an obligation to fix a date for converting to metric road signage, and it would be sensible and economical to review and change speed limits at the same time as any metric changeover – as has just happened in the Irish Republic. Any short term changes should be carried out in a way which minimises the eventual costs of conversion, and this would be aided if the DfT would prepare and publish a contingency plan for the metric changeover – whenever it takes place.

Comment: Again this demonstrates the lack of forward thinking of the civil service. They must know that metrication is going to happen and cannot reasonably be delayed much longer – yet they carry on as though it is irrelevant.

UKMA Committee sent out a request for contributions from members and following a very speedy turnaround has now submitted our views on both consultations.

AGM ELECTION AND CONSTITUTION TIMETABLE

UKMA Members wishing to nominate and vote for officers for the positions of chairman, secretary and treasurer, and propose amendments to the Constitution should consult the timetable below, and make a note of the closing dates.

Event	Proposed Timeline
Final agenda distribution	
Final items for AGM agenda	
Reminder of AGM	
Completion of election	06-Jun-05
Deadline for giving notice of AGM	06-Jun-05
Deadline for constitution changes	28-May-05
Ballot paper distribution	21-May-05
Closing date for nominating committee candidates	14-May-05
Opening date for nominating committee candidates	30-Apr-05
Notice for election	

TESCO PRICE LABELS UNDER SCRUTINY

Britain's leading supermarket chain, Tesco, has been found to be promoting *prices per lb*, on some items, but *savings per kg* on others.

Background

In July 2000, seven months after the law came into force requiring all food sold by weight to be priced per kilogram or per 100g and weighed out on metric scales, Tesco announced it was "turning back the clock" and going back to selling in pounds and ounces.

Although this initially sounded alarming to all of us, it was not a wholesale reversion—so they haven't brought back imperial weighing scales, and they continue to give the price per kg alongside the price per lb on the shelf-edge label (although in some instances these have been found to be inadvertently missing or obscured). The main change they brought about was dispensing with the kg price on in-store posters and promotional labels; thus such adverts carry large per-lb prices, with no indication at all of the price per kg.

Tesco argues that this is lawful, as they claim that advertisements do not count as price labels and are therefore not covered by the Weights & Measures legislation. Their argument has yet to be tested and UKMA can make no comment on the legal standing of this situation until the matter has been properly resolved.

"Giving Customers what they want"

Tesco gave the reason for their decision to make the price per lb much more prominent than the price per kg as a response to the demand from their customers for clear prices per lb. In contrast, it seems strange that they have not rushed to revert to advertising their petrol prices by the gallon - as a gallon is 4.5 times as big as a litre, such a policy would of course make their fuel prices appear to be a lot *higher* than those of their rivals!

In January 2005, one of our members spotted a pack of Tesco Pork Steaks, with the usual style of label on it saying "Special Buy £2.54 per lb". Due to Tesco's policy of making

the per-lb price more prominent than the price per kg, this was unsurprising in itself. It must be noted though, that the words "per lb" are in a fairly small font, and at a quick glance customers could be forgiven for thinking that £2.54 is the pack price, rather than the unit price. The pack price is in fact £3.16.



However, nearby was a pack of Tesco Beef Steaks, with a similar red and yellow promotional label, stating not the *price* but the *saving*—this time the unit price chosen was *per kg*—"Save £1.31 per kg"!



Had Tesco labelled this pack to be consistent with their policy of making the price per lb more prominent on promotional labels, then one would have expected to see the *Saving* offer also based on the price per lb—yielding a saving of only 59p per lb.

Again, UKMA can make no comment at present as to whether there is anything unlawful about this practice, but surely if customers want to see prices per lb as Tesco say they do, then those same shoppers would also want to see savings per lb as well?

UKMA members are therefore asked to keep their eyes open for similar practices in other supermarkets.

UKMA APPEAL FOR EXTRA FUNDS

In early 2004, we launched an appeal to members to make donations to enable us to go ahead with the production of our "Very British Mess" report. The Institute of Physics agreed to contribute to the cost, and the total funds raised from the appeal to members just about covered our share of the printing costs. Together with a couple of generous personal donations from supporters, we were also able to go ahead with a second print-run, as mentioned in November's edition of UKMA News. This we had to finance without any [IoP] subsidy, and as we do not envisage any significant income until members begin renewing their subscriptions in June/July, we will need to raise additional funds if our next project is to have a timely launch.

We are hoping to be able to produce another "mini-VBM" fairly soon, although the subject of this report must unfortunately remain confidential until it is published and released.

To enable this to happen *before* July we will need a significant boost to our funds. Any donations from members and supporters will be received with gratitude. If you feel able to help, please send a cheque, payable to "UK Metric Association" and send it to: UKMA Treasurer, 17 Goring Road, Steyning, West Sussex, BN44 3GF. Alternatively, if you wish to make an electronic bank transfer, please contact the Treasurer for account details on treasurer@metric.org.uk. Anyone making a donation will be automatically entitled to a free copy of the report once it is printed.

AN OLD CHINESE PROVERB

*"I hear, I forget
I see, I remember
I do, I understand"*

In other words, the best way to learn and become familiar with metric is to *Think metric, Use metric, and Practice Metric* - stop converting to imperial!!!

Thanks to Martin Vlietstra for this.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE FORUM?

The UK Metric Association started life as a website and email forum, and over the past few years has evolved into a proper organisation with a constitution, committee, bank account and patrons. It is now a well-known and respected body which is often consulted and asked for interviews—so much so that the forum, although useful to many, is no longer the key focus of the organisation.

The email forum today continues to attract a varied selection of UKMA members (about half of the membership) who find it a useful tool for suggesting, promoting and discussing ideas, asking and answering questions, highlighting news items they have discovered or bringing to our attention everyday metric-imperial observations they have made.

However, it is not uncommon for subjects to veer completely off-topic and this can be off-putting for other members who may hold very different opinions, particularly on political or religious issues. Views expressed by individual members may not necessarily reflect official UKMA policy.

Some new members have joined the forum then left it again soon after. We can only hope that any negative experience of the forum they may have encountered has not disillusioned them from continued UKMA membership.

If you are not part of the forum and wish to ask a question or find out some information or facts which are not on the website, please feel free to email one of the committee members who can then forward it to the group for comments and possible answers.

Not all members have the time to read and compose several emails each day, and to this end we value all members just as much, whether they participate in the forum or not.

Forum Survey

- Do you participate in the email Forum?
- If you do, can you suggest any ways in which it might be improved?
- If you have joined then left the forum, can you tell us what prompted you to leave it?

Please email any comments to me on phil@durden.clara.co.uk — thank you.

URGENT: NEW SECRETARY NEEDED

Roddy Urquhart, pictured, is stepping down as UKMA Secretary at the AGM in July after serving three consecutive terms. During this time he has served tirelessly and would like to rebalance his work / family / leisure / UKMA activities. His demanding job has often entailed him having to juggle many different responsibilities at the same time—somehow, he has managed to achieve this in a business-like and efficient manner.



Grateful Thanks

We are very grateful for all his hard work as secretary, which often meant undertaking tasks beyond the remit of the basic Secretary role. It should be noted that he had ideally wanted to hand over to someone else last July, but as no-one stepped forward, he obligingly continued for another year. This year he will not be “carrying on for yet another year” as before. Therefore, unless someone else volunteers their services, we will be left without a secretary after July’s AGM, which will make it virtually impossible to function as the professional organisation which UKMA has become and is known for.

With a greatly increased membership since Roddy took on the role, it should now be much easier to find someone to take over. On this basis the committee is appealing to members to offer services as Secretary—even if initially only for one year.

An outline of the job is listed below, and

anyone interested should contact Roddy who will be happy to explain in more detail what the role entails.

Secretary Role Outline

- Acts as formal point of contact for the organisation - that is, all formal communications originate from or are addressed to him/her
- Calls meetings (including booking venues), prepares agendas, records minutes, and circulates these to members
- Is responsible for maintaining a list of members entitled to participate (requires liaison with Treasurer)
- Is responsible for the conduct of elections - that is, dispatching ballot papers, counting votes and declaring the result (can be done electronically)
- May be authorised to issue statements or speak publicly on behalf of the organisation (optional)

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Roddy is more than willing to support the new secretary during the transition into their new role.

Interested?

Please email Roddy on:

secretary@metric.org.uk,

call 07771 813466, or write to: UKMA Secretary, 10 Pitts Lane, Andover SP10 2HY

AGM DATE FIXED

This year’s UKMA Annual General Meeting and Conference is to be held on Saturday 9 July, at a venue to be confirmed, but will be situated in central London as in previous years. Proceedings begin at 10:00 with the AGM and move into ‘conference mode’ for the remainder of the day—which usually draws to a close at around 16:00. Members are strongly encouraged to keep that date free and make every effort to attend.

Edited and produced by Phil Durden

Do you have any comments about this newsletter, its contents, layout, etc.?

Do you have any suggestions for articles for future newsletters?

Do you prefer postal newsletters or electronic?

Please let me know! phil@durden.clara.co.uk