



Infotainment Systems

Background & Current Government Policy

In-vehicle infotainment refers to systems within cars that provide both information delivery and entertainment for drivers and passengers, typically via video and audio interfaces. The vast majority of new cars, across all price points, have infotainment systems built in.

In the UK it is legal to use your car's infotainment system to accept calls and to use as a sat nav so long as the use is 'hands-free'¹ and does not impede your view of the road and traffic ahead. You can however receive 6 penalty points and a £200 fine if you hold and use a handheld phone, sat nav, tablet or, crucially, any device that can send and receive data while driving.

The European New Car Assessment Programme (Euro NCAP), of which the UK's Department for Transport is a member, will introduce rules in January 2026 to downgrade the safety ratings of new vehicles that do not have buttons on the dashboard to control simple operations such as indicating and activating hazard warning lights².

¹<https://www.gov.uk/using-mobile-phones-when-driving-the-law#:~:text=You%20can%20get%20a%20penalty,in%20the%20last%202%20years.>
²<https://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/cars/article-13153771/Car-makers-ditch-distracting-touchscreens.html>

IAM RoadSmart Research:

A 2020 study conducted by TRL on behalf of IAM RoadSmart, FIA and the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund investigated the impact of the latest in-vehicle infotainment systems had on drivers' reaction times. The study asked participant drivers to perform tasks on the infotainment systems while studying their lane positioning, reaction times and responses to external stimuli.

- The study found that reactions times were significantly impaired when using the infotainment systems, more so than alcohol and cannabis use³.
- There was also significant deviation in lane position seen in drivers when operating the infotainment system.
- It took an average of between 11 and 16 seconds for drivers to perform a simple task using 'Android Auto' and 'Apple CarPlay'.
- There was an average of 0.53m deviation of lane position amongst the participants when performing navigation tasks with Android Auto and 0.50m deviation with Apple CarPlay.
- Response to external stimuli was also heavily impaired when engaged with the infotainment programmes – it was found to be 50% slower amongst the participants.

IAM RoadSmart Opinion Panel, October 2024

- IAM RoadSmart's October Opinion Panel found that 77% of respondents believed that the increasing instances of touch screens being used in cars for essential control functions has a negative impact on drivers' ability to keep eyes on the road.
- 59% of participants believed that touch screen infotainment systems negatively impacted their ability to change radio stations and climate controls in their vehicle.

External Research

Final 2023 figures released by the DfT in their annual Reported Road Casualties Report show that in Great Britain, in 34.9% of fatal collisions distraction or impairment was a contributory factor⁴. It is the third largest factor in the findings, behind only speed and behaviour or inexperience.

- This is an increase from 29% in 2022 and up from 23% in 2013 according to DfT figures.

DfT Think!:

Drivers using a hands-free or handheld mobile phone are slower at recognising and reacting to hazards. The research shows:

- Your reaction times are 2 times slower if you text and drive using a hands-free phone than if you drink drive, and this increases to three times if you use a handheld phone.
- Even careful drivers can be distracted by a call or text – and a split-second lapse in concentration could result in a crash. At 30 mph a car travels 100 feet in 2.3 seconds.

³https://iamwebsite.blob.core.windows.net/media/docs/default-source/default-document-library/iam-roadsmart-trl-simulator-study_infotainment.pdf?sfvrsn=d873495c_2

⁴<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/reported-road-casualties-great-britain-annual-report-2023/reported-road-casualties-great-britain-annual-report-2023#factors-contributing-to-fatalities>

IAM RoadSmart calls to action:

- The issue of distracted driving demands greater research to understand the impact infotainment systems on driver attention; we would like to see the Department for Transport commission TRL to investigate the issue further to examine the impact of the size and functionality of new infotainment systems.
- IAM RoadSmart is not calling for a change in the law to ban hands-free devices considering there are many distractions drivers need to manage inside the vehicle but urges drivers to take responsibility and avoid touching screens and taking voice or video calls while driving. Setting of sat-navs, assists and playlists should be done prior to driving.
- We urge policymakers to monitor the use of infotainment systems and their relative contribution to road traffic accidents in the UK as well as the penalties imposed for their use, which should develop as our understanding of their impact becomes more sophisticated.
- Vehicle manufacturers should include buttons for basic functionality, such as climate control, radio and volume and have high-quality voice control to assist in reducing people from looking down at screens.

COMMENT

IAM RoadSmart Director of Policy and Standards, Nicholas Lyes said:

"Distracted driving kills, we already know that it contributes to over a third of fatal collisions in the UK."

"Concerningly, there is a trend amongst manufacturers to integrate key car functions through infotainment systems. We know from existing research these systems can keep drivers' eyes off the road for longer and create greater scope for being distracted behind the wheel."

"Reducing the number of distractions in vehicles should be a priority for policy makers. We welcome Euro NCAP's decision to downgrade the safety ratings of cars that require users to perform key functions via infotainment systems."

"We would like to see further investigation into the impact of these systems on driver attention as it is a concerningly under-researched area."