

New campaign calls for safer wheelchair accessible vehicles

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Disabled Motoring UK is gearing up to campaign for a change in legislation that will improve the safety of wheelchair accessible vehicles (WAVs).

The charity believes it is a moral and human right for people who travel in a wheelchair to be able to purchase a converted vehicle that has been properly tested and is as safe as the original car.

The 'No Compromises!' safety campaign will urge buyers of wheelchair accessible cars to demand sled testing certificates – the only way to check a vehicle is as safe as possible. The campaign will also seek to change legislation so that only 'sled tested' vehicles can be sold.

Worryingly, the industry has seen up to 50 per cent of conversions that have passed other less significant tests fail the vital sled test.

A sled test is similar to the crash testing seen on TV - a dummy is strapped into a wheelchair within the car, which is then put through head-on collisions to check that both the belts and their fixings are strong enough to withstand a real-life accident and keep the wheelchair user secure.

The reason testing is so vital after conversion to a wheelchair accessible vehicle is because converting a car is a complex process involving significant structural changes to the vehicle such as lowering the floor. If this is not done properly, and by experts, the car may be unsafe.

Helen Dolphin, Director of Policy and Campaigns for Disabled Motoring UK Disabled Motoring (<http://www.disabledmotoring.org/news/new-campaign-calls-for-safer-wheelchair-accessible-vehicles>), said: "It is amazing that vehicles are being sold that may not be safe for the drivers and wheelchair users and we feel strongly that this must stop. We will be calling on the Government to change legislation so that people don't unknowingly purchase unsafe vehicles. Alongside this we will be educating people to make sure they ask the right questions before purchasing a converted car."

Constables Mobility's Constables Mobility (<http://www.constablesmobility.com>) Managing Director David Constable, one of the experts supporting the campaign, explains: "People who travel in wheelchairs have a right to a vehicle that has been properly tested so they are as safe as possible in the event of an accident. I strongly believe that all companies who convert cars should only be allowed to sell them if they have been successfully tested after conversion – including being sled tested - so the vehicle meets and exceeds the latest European safety standards. It's a moral and human right to have a car that has been converted safely."

From 29 April 2012, wheelchair accessible vehicles have to meet both the European standard for the car before it is converted and pass additional tests which check the changes made during the conversion process. However, not every conversion will have passed the same tests and it doesn't guarantee that sled testing has been carried out.

Disabled Motoring UK (DMUK) campaigns on behalf of all disabled motorists, passengers and Blue Badge

holders. The charity represents their interests at both local and national levels, and engages with government and industry to ensure that the voice of disabled people is heard.

DMUK is the only UK charity that campaigns on behalf of disabled people in this way. Without DMUK and its parent charities the Disabled Drivers' Association and the Disabled Drivers' Motor Club, there would be no Blue Badge scheme, no Motability cars, and no mobility component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) to help disabled people defray some of the extra travel and transport costs that they incur.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

A safety campaign website has been launched Sled Testing (<http://www.sledgetesting.co.uk/>)

What is sled testing?

The sled test is similar to the crash testing that many of us have seen on TV a dummy is strapped into a wheelchair in the body of the car, which is then put through head-on collisions to check that both the belts and their fixings are strong enough to withstand a real-life accident and keep the wheelchair user secure.

Sled testing is the only means of proving that the cell (i.e. the conversion anchorage points together with the belts and tie-downs) is safe.

The industry has witnessed a 50 per cent failure rate with the wheelchair and occupant sled test, even when the conversion has previously been pull-tested and the belts and tie-downs have been tested separately by the belt manufacturer. It is when the constituent parts are put together as a complete system that they fail.

Why is testing important?

- Converting a WAV involves major changes so the original tests may no longer apply
- In a WAV, the wheelchair is the seat but it wasn't there when the original car was tested
- Testing is needed to check both the fixings and the belts work properly in the event of a crash
- Sled testing is the only test that actively checks whether the WAV is able to keep the passenger travelling in a wheelchair secure in a real-life accident.

How do people make sure the vehicle they are buying is safe for the driver and wheelchair user?

Converting a car to make it wheelchair accessible is a complex process involving significant structural changes to the vehicle such as lowering the floor. If this is not done properly, and by experts, the car may be unsafe.

The simple way to check whether a new car meets these standards is to ask to see its certification. Sled tested WAVs will have an ECWVTA.M1 certificate. But do check that the certificate is for the conversion, not the original car.

For more information or interview requests contact Helen Dolphin Director of Policy and Campaigns Disabled Motoring UK 01508 489449 or e-mail helen@disabledmotoring.org or Suzi Christie at Blueberry PR on 01435 830031 or e-mail suzi@blueberry-pr.co.uk