

The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down
Advanced Motorists Group



October 2025





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The Newsletter of the North Down Advanced Motorists Group (Group 8199)
Helping to Improve the Standard of Driving on the Roads in Northern Ireland and the
advancement of road safety

October 2025

<https://ndam.org.uk/>

Vol 25.9

<https://www.facebook.com/NorthDownGroupIAM>

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Test passes

No test passes to report this month.

Good luck and safe driving or riding to any Associates approaching their test.

New Members

This month we welcome new motorcycle members Andrew Donovan and James Davison. We hope you not only gain from being a member of our Group but will also enjoy the friendship and camaraderie of our get-togethers.

Cover picture

The September cover picture was Saintfield at the roundabout between Main Street, Ballynahinch Road and Lisburn Road. Congratulations to Neil Anthony, Stewart Campbell, David Harcourt, Jim O'Brien, Ralph Magee, Angela Bell, Brian Gillies and Norman Shearer.

Do you know where this month's picture was taken? There is a prize to aim for as well as the satisfaction of good observation and, of course, getting a mention in the next Road Observer. See the report of our AGM later in this issue for the winner for 2024/25. The prize is a year's Group membership to the Member who gets the greatest number of correct answers in the year to October 2025. Submit your answers to: leslie.ashe.LA@googlemail.com

Dates for your diary

In addition to the regular STAC nights for car Associates and the regular bike runs (notified by email to bike members and also on Facebook) we have a varied programme for the Group Nights. All meetings will take place in the Boathouse at Groomsport Harbour car park unless otherwise stated.

28 October	STAC 5 - Overtaking
4 November	STAC 6 - Motorways and dual carriageways
11 November	Group Night - Speaker Bruce Steele IAM RoadSmart Road Safety Manager (NI)
25 November	STAC 7 - Manoeuvring
2 December	Additional driving practice
9 December	Group Night - Christmas Dinner

STAC - Short Term Associate Course. Car Associate Members should ensure that you are familiar with the relevant section of the "Associate Handbook" before each STAC night so that you can get the most benefit from the theory session as well as your observed drive. **And remember to bring your logbook with you.**

Annual General Meeting

We had a good turnout for the 2025 AGM to the extent that we almost ran out of cups for tea and coffee. Chair Tina Lannin presented her report detailing the Group activities throughout the last year and noting that Members achieved a total of 5 passes, of which 2 were car passes and 3 motorcycle passes one of which was a F1RST. In addition 6 Local Observers (5 car and 1 motorcycle) successfully completed their assessments to become National Observers.

Campbell English presented the Treasurer's report which showed the Group had a healthy balance.

David Harcourt presented the membership report and explained that he took on the role reluctantly and that for personal reasons he had been unable to arrange for the collection of Group subscriptions in 2024/25. However the IAM RoadSmart database (DARTS) shows that we have some 100 members split roughly equally between cars and bikes.



The Committee for the coming year was elected and membership is as follows:

Chair: Tina Lannin	Secretary: Stephen Patterson
Treasurer: Campbell English	
Committee Members: Leslie Ashe, Ivan Greenfield, Colin Hay, Ralph Magee, Leah Taylor	



Awards

The awards this year were presented by Tina.

The Mervyn Bates 3 Jags award for Member of the Year went to Treasurer Campbell English. The new Motorcycle Award went to Neil Anthony and the Annie McFarland Memorial Award went to Ivan Greenfield.



It was also announced that the award of a free Group subscription for achieving the greatest number of correct answers to the Road Observer cover competition went to Norman Shearer with 8 correct answers. It was close with a tie for second place to David McFall, Richard Walker, Jim O'Brien and David Harcourt with 6 each.



David Harcourt resigned from the committee after many years service including 13 as Chair and to mark his departure Tina presented him with a gift on behalf of the Group to thank him for all the time and effort he has contributed over the years. He will be continuing as a Group member and as an Observer so we will continue to have the benefit of his knowledge, wisdom, wit and bright Hawaiian shirts.



Stephen Sherry

Our guest speaker following the AGM was Stephen (Stevie) Sherry the new IAM RoadSmart Chief Examiner for Northern Ireland. He explained that he had been a member of the North Down Group years ago but wasn't an Observer. As well as being an examiner he was also a Masters mentor for cars and bikes. He has taken over the role of Chief Examiner from Charlie Stewart, who has retired from the role, and he has trained to be a National Observer Assessor. His current role is examining Examiners, examining candidates doing their Masters test and also assessing Members wishing to become National Observers. He works with Chairs and Secretaries of Groups and with Bruce Steele who is the IAM RoadSmart Road Safety Manager for Northern Ireland.

He explained that rather than having a set talk he would answer questions from Members.

In response to questions about the Masters test Stevie explained that it will last for one and a half to two hours. During the test he will be looking for polish and consistency in achieving a score of 1 across the various categories. It's a good challenge, it's good to be retested and he would recommend it to anyone. About the mentoring process, it's a tailored approach to your needs and each session is about 90 minutes on the road. Just talking throughout the session helps your concentration.

On the subject of spoken thoughts generally he said that you should say what you see and what you are doing about what you see using the IPSCA framework. In relation to bikes he gave an example of riding with a motorcyclist on test on the busy Lisburn Road in Belfast and looking to see how often the bike's brake lights came on as a demonstration of how far ahead the rider was observing and the action being taken.

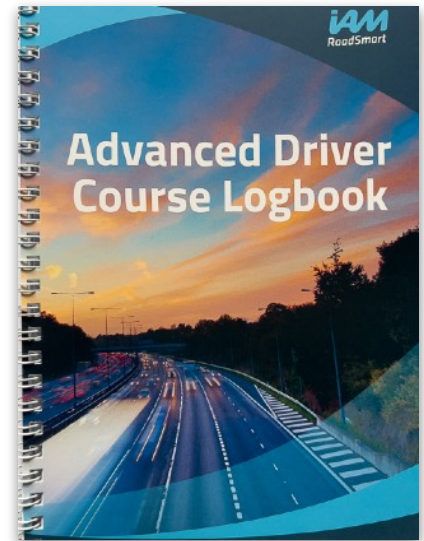
Tell the Examiner why you are not doing something. For example doing 42/43 in a 60 limit with a car in front weaving, sometimes across the white line. The Examiner is writing - explain to him why you

are not overtaking. In relation to bikes, where you don't have the opportunity to discuss things as you go along, make sure you take the opportunity at the end of the test to explain your reasoning for a particular action or inaction before the Examiner gives you the result.



Stephen acknowledged that there is stress associated with tests but that it is natural. With plenty of practice you will have the muscle memory to get into your comfort zone where you can emphasise your skills. In a car Examiners may make notes during a test and you may see this out of the corner of your eye. Don't just think "what have I done wrong" as the Examiner may be writing that you did something particularly well. And on test Stevie said if you make a mistake just move on.

With regard to National Observing, IAM RoadSmart, with the aim of achieving greater consistency, has produced new logbooks for Associates which are being reprinted with more run sheets and the documents declaration. This logbook sets out clearly the competencies to be achieved for the Advanced Test with the aim of achieving greater consistency in the standard. For Masters, Roadcraft remains the standard. He also said that a document declaration should be completed before every drive.



On a National Observer assessment Stevie will "role play" situations on the road to make the experience similar to taking out an Associate. This gives the candidate the opportunity to demonstrate their skill in open questions to test the Associates knowledge and also their reasoning.

In response to a question about how to assess a 20% factor of safety when cornering Stevie recommended stick to what we know - err on the side of greater safety taking everything into account.

In response to a question as to whether a performance car is required to do the Masters he said that the car doesn't matter. You should know how your own car performs eg for overtakes and remember the test is about what you are doing not about the car. He added - don't borrow a car or a bike to do a test recounting an incident where someone did that and failed but did a repeat test the next week in their own car and passed.

More generally Stevie commented that 42% of IAM members are with a Group and he recommends that Associates should stay with their Group to keep their standards up and to remain sharp. Of course becoming a Fellow member or an Observer will achieve this.

Bruce Steele NI IAM RoadSmart Road Safety Manager attended the AGM and he talked about getting greater co-operation and collaboration between Groups saying that he was planning on setting up meetings with Groups and one of the many issues to be addressed was the completion of the competency sheet which has been discussed earlier.

Safe Driving and Motorcycling in Autumn: Essential Tips for the Season



Autumn is one of the most beautiful seasons on the road, with its crisp air, vivid colours, and peaceful scenery. However, it's also a time when driving and motorcycling become more challenging due to unpredictable weather, shorter days, and rapidly changing road conditions. Whether you're behind the wheel of a car or riding a motorcycle, being prepared for autumn hazards is essential for your safety and that of others on the road. Below are practical tips to help you navigate this transitional season confidently and responsibly.

1. Adjust to Changing Light Conditions

As the days grow shorter, visibility becomes a significant concern. Dawn and dusk arrive earlier, making it harder to see and be seen. Drivers and motorcyclists alike should ensure their lights are in top condition. Check headlights, taillights, brake lights, and indicators frequently. Replace any dim or broken bulbs and keep lenses clean to maximise visibility.

For motorcyclists, wearing reflective gear or bright-coloured clothing can make a huge difference during low-light hours. Drivers should remember that glare from the low autumn sun can be blinding during sunrise and sunset, especially when the road is wet. Keep a good pair of sunglasses in your vehicle and regularly clean your windscreen, inside and out, to reduce anything that might amplify glare.

2. Beware of Wet Leaves and Slippery Surfaces

Fallen leaves are a hallmark of autumn, but they can create treacherous road conditions. When leaves are wet, they become as slippery as ice. They can hide potholes, painted road markings, and other hazards. You should slow down when approaching leaf-covered areas, particularly around bends or junctions.



Motorcyclists face an even greater risk, as wet leaves can cause loss of traction. It's best to avoid braking or accelerating sharply on leaf-covered patches. Ride smoothly, maintain a steady throttle, and keep a safe distance from vehicles ahead. If you must stop, do so gradually to prevent skidding.

3. Watch Out for Temperature Fluctuations

Autumn weather can vary dramatically within a single day. Mornings may bring frost, afternoons can be mild, and evenings chilly. These temperature swings can lead to dew or frost forming on the road, particularly on bridges, overpasses, and shaded areas.

All should be cautious on their morning commute, when black ice or frost patches are most likely. Check tyre pressures regularly, as temperature changes can cause fluctuations that affect grip and handling. Using tyres rated for cooler weather can improve safety and performance.

4. Prepare your car or motorcycle for the season

A little maintenance goes a long way when it comes to safe autumn travel. For drivers, check tyre tread depth and pressure — adequate tread helps prevent hydroplaning on wet roads. Make sure your windscreen wipers are in good condition and your washer fluid is filled with a solution that can handle cooler temperatures. Also, check your brakes and battery; cold weather can quickly expose weaknesses in both.

For motorcyclists, ensure that your bike is serviced before the season changes. Clean and lubricate the chain, inspect brake pads and cables, and check that all lights are working properly. Consider switching to gear designed for variable weather, including waterproof gloves and layers that can adapt to temperature shifts.

5. Manage Fog and Rain

Fog is another common autumn hazard that can reduce visibility dramatically. In foggy conditions, drivers should use low-beam headlights or fog lights, never high beams which reflect light back and worsen visibility especially at night. Increase following distance and reduce speed, giving yourself more time to react. Fog lights should be used only when visibility is less than 100 metres and should be switched off when visibility improves.



Motorcyclists should use visor treatments that prevent fog buildup and wear reflective clothing to stay visible to others.

When rain starts after a dry spell, be especially careful — oil residue on the road mixes with water to create a slick surface during the first few minutes of rainfall.

6. Plan for Early Darkness

With sunset arriving earlier, many commuters find themselves driving or riding home in the dark. Darkness reduces depth perception, peripheral vision, and colour recognition, all of which can increase accident risk. Before heading out, make sure your route is well-lit where possible.

Motorcyclists should assume they are less visible in poor light and at night and use auxiliary lighting or reflective decals on their helmets and bikes. Drivers should keep a lookout for motorcycles and cyclists, as they are harder to spot in dim or low sunlight conditions.



7. Adjust Your Driving or Riding Style

Perhaps the most important autumn safety tip is to adapt your behaviour to the conditions. Reduce speed, avoid sudden manoeuvres, and stay alert. Keep a safe following distance — at least two seconds behind other vehicles in dry conditions, and at least 4 in the wet.

Motorcyclists should focus on smooth inputs — gentle throttle, steady braking, and gradual cornering. Smooth control helps maintain traction on unpredictable surfaces.

Conclusion

Autumn brings unique challenges and rewards for drivers and motorcyclists alike. The key to enjoying this beautiful season safely lies in preparation, awareness, and adaptability. From early sunsets and slippery leaves to chilly mornings, every change in the environment demands your attention.

By maintaining your vehicle or motorcycle, adjusting to variable conditions, and riding or driving with care, you can make every autumn journey safe, comfortable, and enjoyable — whether you're admiring the autumn foliage or simply commuting to work.

And finally.... from insurance claims

- I collided with a stationary tree.
 - I collided with a stationary truck coming the other way.
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The views expressed in the “Road Observer” are not necessarily those of the Editor, the North Down Advanced Motorists Group or IAM RoadSmart