

The Road Observer

The Newsletter of the North Down
Advanced Motorists Group



January 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

January 2025

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Test passes

Congratulations this month to car member
Leah Taylor
and also to Leslie Ashe
on passing his National Observer (car) assessment

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

New Members

This month we welcome new car member Clifford Wilson. 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.

December cover picture

This was taken at "The Cut" in Banbridge. I thought that this was an easy one and that lots would get the answer. Congratulations to Ivan McStea, John McCready, David Harcourt, Norman Shearer, James O'Brien, Michael Gould, John Seawright, Ernie Foster, Ralph Magee, Ivan Greenfield and Richard Walker.

Do you know where the months cover picture was taken? There is now a prize to aim for as well as the satisfaction of good observation and, of course, getting a mention in the next Road Observer. 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@gmail.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.

4 February	STAC 1 - Human Factors
11 February	Group Night - Talk by MLA on Road Safety matters
25 February	STAC 2 - IPSGA
4 March	STAC 3 - Core driving skills
11 March	Group night - CRASH accident management services
25 March	STAC 4 - Bends
1 April	STAC 5 - Junctions and roundabouts
8 April	Group Night - to be announced
22 April	Easter Tuesday - No meeting
29 April	STAC 6 - Overtaking
6 May	STAC 7 - Motorways and dual carriageways
13 May	Group Night - Return visit by K9 Rescue (practical demonstration)
27 May	STAC 8 - Manoeuvring
3 June	Additional driving practice
10 June	Group night - Drive/ride to The Rhinka for ice-cream.

STAC - Short Term Associate Course. 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.

Norah Reid

Norah passed away on 8 January after a short illness. She was an IAM member since June 1988 and gave long, sterling service to promoting road safety and the IAM.

She was an active Committee member of the Belfast Group and remained an honorary member of that Group. She was involved in the establishment of the North Down Group in 1991 and in addition to her observing roles served continuously as a committee member for many years, holding the office of Chair from 1995 to 2006. She was also Chair of the Northern Ireland Groups Committee/Region 8 Groups Liaison Forum from 2003 to 2010. She was highly regarded within the IAM community in Northern Ireland.

Her memorial service was attended by Group Members and by some Members from the Belfast Group. The picture is of Norah being presented with an award for her service to the Group at our AGM in 2013 by the then IAM Chief Executive Simon Best.



January bike ride

What a way to start the year! On our first run of 2025, 11 riders turned up to enjoy a fantastic ride to Frenchs Cafe and Bistro in Clough.



Of course, we didn't take the direct route – that's just not our style! Here's the route we tackled:

- Instead we left Ards taking the Ballyrainey Road and then into Comber, out to Ballygowan and on to Moneyrea.
- A detour to Carryduff and then to Saintfield via the Temple Cross Roads, which is now a roundabout.
- From Saintfield to Crossgar and on to Ballynahinch but not using the Ballynahinch Road, no, no, no. we went via Kilmore.
- From Ballynahinch through Spa in the direction of Castlewellan but out to Seaford and then Clough.
- The weather was on our side, but the low winter sun made some stretches quite the challenge! We wrapped up with great conversations and coffee at Frenchs.

Save the Date: Our next run is planned for Saturday, 15th February

We'll be heading to Portaferry, crossing to Strangford, and then embarking on a mystery tour. Stay tuned for details.

A big thank you to everyone who joined us – let's keep the wheels turning in 2025!



Driving Through a Finnish Winter: Tina Lannin's Experience in Lapland

In mid-January, I found myself travelling in the heart of Lapland, in north Finland, where winter conditions can be both stunning and treacherous. While the weather this year was milder than usual, with temperatures reaching record highs of 4C for January, the conditions were still demanding when navigating the icy roads and snow-covered landscapes.



Just before my visit, there had been a light rain, which had frozen over, making the surfaces slick and hazardous and the area turned into a huge ice rink. This unexpected layer of ice added a new challenge to an already demanding winter driving environment. The roads were lined with towering mounds of dirty, slushy snow, and even the sidewalks were crusted with thick ice that made walking a careful venture. I was very glad I had brought crampons; after falling out of my airport cab and almost breaking a leg, they went on immediately!



Driving in these conditions meant being extra cautious. The Finnish winter roads, particularly the main roads, were well maintained, thanks to regular snow clearing by snow diggers. A two-hour drive to Riisitunturi National Park, where I planned to capture the beauty of the winter pine tree landscape, presented no major challenges on the main roads. However,

when I arrived, I was greeted by a sight that was both surprising and disappointing—the snow had melted from the trees as far as the eye could see, erasing the very winter wonderland I had hoped to photograph.

Despite this setback, I didn't let it ruin the experience. We stopped in a traditional hut to enjoy a meal of gáhkku—a soft, flatbread baked over an open fire, filled with reindeer meat, served with sausages and hot blueberry juice. This rustic meal was the perfect way to warm up and appreciate the remote beauty of the wilderness.

On the return journey through the Arctic Circle, near the border with Russia, the driving conditions began to reflect the more extreme aspects of the Finnish

winter. I noticed the increasing difficulty in maintaining a steady grip on the road, particularly when approaching bends or when wind gusts blew snow across the tarmac. In this remote part of the world, traffic was sparse—so sparse, in fact, that we were able to stop in the road (we couldn't pull over for the snow drifts) and fully appreciate the stunning appearance of polar stratospheric clouds, which seemed almost otherworldly against the darkening winter sky.



Driving in such conditions requires a combination of preparation and awareness. Here are a few key takeaways from my experience:

1. **Winter tyres are essential:** The importance of having the correct tyres cannot be overstated. The icy conditions demand tyres designed for extreme cold and snow, providing the grip and stability needed to navigate both icy roads and packed snow
2. **Drive with extra care:** Speed limits are there for a reason, especially in extreme winter conditions. Keeping a safe distance from the car in front of you is critical to allow for sudden stops or corrections if the vehicle starts to slip.
3. **Be prepared for the unexpected:** The weather in Lapland is unpredictable. While it wasn't as snowy as usual, you never know when snow or ice may make the roads more dangerous. Always ensure your vehicle is equipped for winter conditions, including a full tank of fuel, emergency supplies, and a reliable navigation system.
4. **Keep your distance:** When driving on snow-covered or icy roads, it's important to maintain more space between vehicles than usual. Stopping distances can be much longer, and it can take time to regain control if you lose traction.
5. **Respect the road conditions:** In remote areas like Lapland, where road traffic is light and the environment is harsher, respect for the road conditions and your surroundings is essential. Whether it's slowing down for curves or acknowledging that the road might suddenly change from clear to icy, always drive with the expectation that conditions can change at any moment.



Driving in the Finnish winter can be a magical experience—but only if you're well-prepared and aware of the conditions around you. Careful planning, good equipment, patience, and prudence on the road can make a significant difference in a land of extreme weather.

National Observer Assessment by Leslie Ashe

After many years of observing as a Local Observer (car) I finally took the plunge and did my National Observer Assessment in the middle of January.

Despite the experience of Observing over all those years and having been regularly re-assessed as a Local Observer it was with a little trepidation that I arrived for my assessment with Chief Examiner for NI Charlie Stewart at the Tesco carpark at Springhill.

When you are ready for the assessment, the Examiner will get in touch and tell you that he will act as an Associate on his third observed drive and that his previous Observer had said that he needed some guidance on the correct techniques to advanced driving mainly with my approach to one of a number of scenarios:

- Urban environment
- Rural environment
- Mainly with my use of gears
- Mainly with my use of brakes
- Mainly with my approach to overtaking
- Mainly with my use of motorway and dual carriageways
- Mainly with my positioning on bends and corners
- With my approach to and dealing with roundabouts
- I'm currently driving a plug-in hybrid vehicle with electronic gearbox and electronic controls.

You will choose a route that provides an opportunity to observe the Examiner and help coach him with the scenario he has suggested. This part of the Assessment will take about an hour with time for a pre-brief and a briefing at the end. The actual observed drive should last for 30-40 minutes.

Following that, the next hour is your turn. You swap cars, do the usual checks etc and the Examiner will observe your driving, again for 30-40 minutes. You can use the same route or a different route. During the drive you will be required to do spoken thoughts but not for the whole drive.

In my case the chosen subject was roundabouts so I devised a route containing 12 roundabouts including mini roundabouts, dual carriageway roundabouts, a roundabout with 5 exits, traffic light controlled roundabouts and a rural roundabout. I also built in a possible safe place to park during the drive in case we needed to stop to discuss any issues arising with his driving and which we did in fact use.



When I was observing Charlie the route was mainly urban and for my drive he asked me to pick a route which would give me the opportunity to drive to the national speed limit.

Back to Springhill and Charlie congratulated me on becoming a National Observer. Two hours passed in what seemed like no time at all and the cup of coffee with Charlie afterwards was most welcome.

From my point of view the big thing that emerged from the process is the emphasis on asking open questions eg how, when, where, what, why to get the Associate to think rather than asking a question which would generate a yes or no answer or just telling the Associate what they should have done.

Also there is strong focus on the competency sheet at the start of each section of the Associate logbook. The Associate should be able to demonstrate their competency under each of the criteria.

Overall it was a rewarding experience and I would hope this will provide encouragement to all our Local Observers and those Members currently in training. Many thanks to David Harcourt for the mock assessment and to both David and Colin Hay for their very helpful advice and guidance

And finally....

Good to see that the drivers of the Range Rover and the van managed to park their vehicles safely out of the way of the traffic. Pity he or she didn't consider that they would be forcing a mobility scooter or anyone with a child's buggy into traffic.



The views expressed in the “Road Observer” are not necessarily those of the Editor, the North Down Advanced Motorists Group or IAM RoadSmart